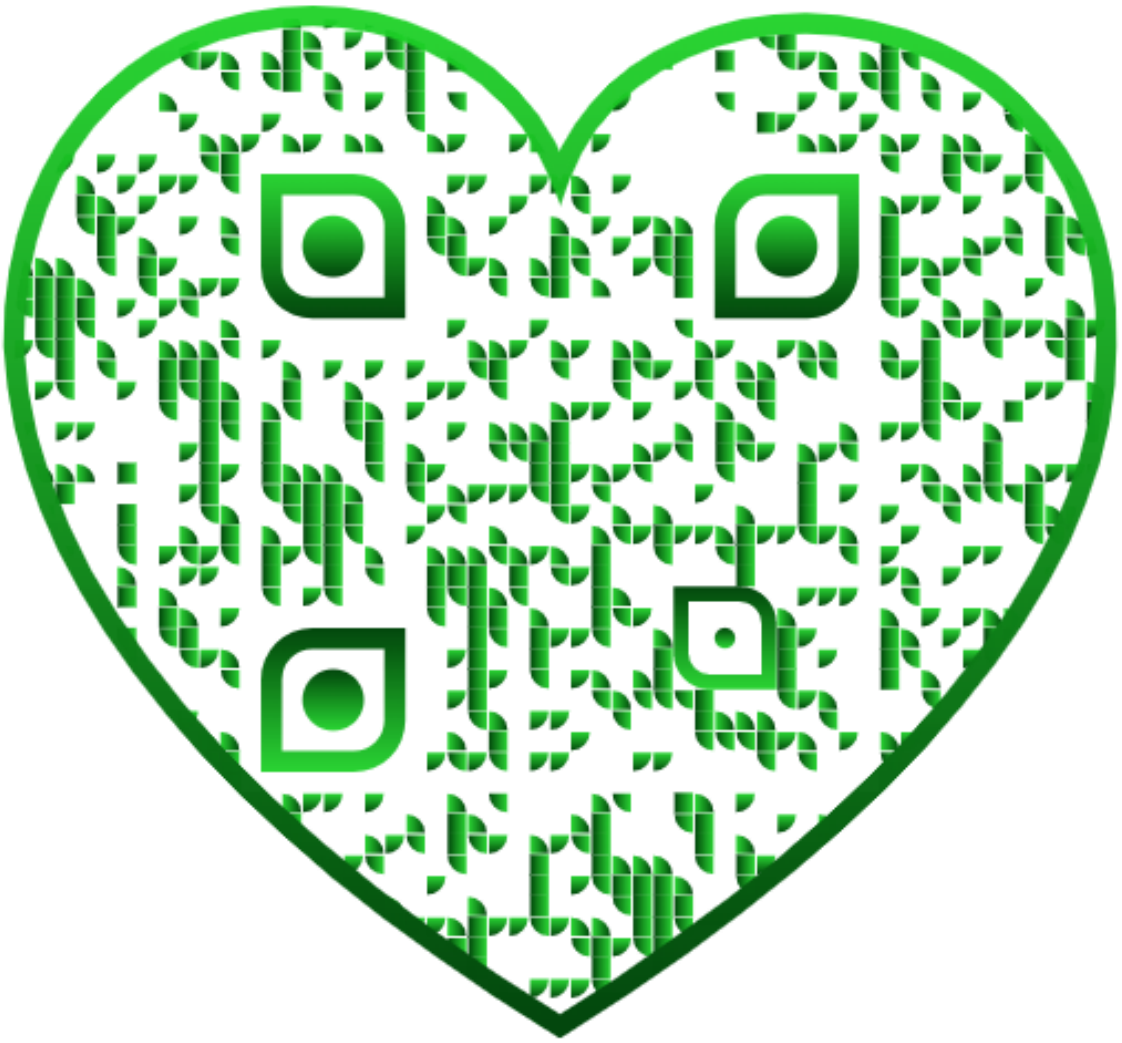
The SUPER NATURAL

A NEW VISION OF THE UNEXPLAINED

Whitley Strieber

and Jeffrey J. Kripal



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DEDICATION

I dedicate this book to the memory of Anne Strieber. We evolved our approach to the super natural together. She contributed three foundational insights. The first is that the close encounter experience is something unknown and must be kept in question. Second, that the question must be deepened and can only be resolved by scientific and academic inquiry. It must no longer be dismissed with assumptions, beliefs, and premature theorizing. Third, that, after reading in excess of two hundred thousand testaments from the public about close encounter experiences, she was able to say with authority that close encounters with apparent aliens often include perceptions of the dead as well.

It is on her rigorous questioning and tireless inquiry that my own insights depend.

—Whitley Strieber

I dedicate this book to Julie Kripal, whose magnetic hands, night visitations, and general spiritual mojo have opened my mind, and body, to new levels of energy, possibility, and being.

—Jeff Kripal

Instead of shunning the darkness, we can face straight into it with an open mind. When we do that, the unknown changes. Fearful things become understandable, and a truth is suggested: the enigmatic presence of the human mind winks back from the dark.

Whitley Strieber, *Communion*

The eye with which I see God is the same eye with which God sees me.

Meister Eckhart (1260–1327)

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The Already World

JEFF

They took a little hair off my head and cut my nails. I asked questions in my mind, but before I could verbalize them, they answered back very softly but directly, "We are making a new you." I asked him, "Are you like angels?" and he replied, "Not as you have been taught."

An Anonymous Letter Writer in *The Communion Letters*

I am afraid of this book. There is something about it, something explosive and new. It is not a neutral book. It is an apocalypse of thought waiting for you, the reader, to actualize.

The world will not really end as you turn these pages, of course. Not the real one anyway. Much might well be lost—we hope. You should know that. But more, much more—really everything—might well be gained. In a few words, this is a book about a new world, the next world that has already arrived, that has always been here, whether we have recognized its presence or not.

In the pages that follow, Whitley and I explore the proposal that we are all embedded in a much larger, fiercely alive and richly conscious reality that is only, at best, indirectly addressed by everything that the human species has ever thought or believed. The religions, for example, have been

attempts to look at and engage this conscious reality as if it were primarily concerned with us, but we don't really know that, and in fact we cannot know that. Not at least yet.

Our proposal? To venture outside the present houses of faith without forgetting those family homes or leaving the spirit behind. To embrace science in a new way, by promoting a more generous vision of the full human experience of reality that can embrace and ponder "more stuff," especially the wild, fantastic stuff that shouts, glows, and zaps in these pages. And, above all, to understand, to *really* understand that we are already and always have been living in a super natural world, that we ourselves are highly evolved prisms or mediums of this super nature coming into consciousness, and that many of the things that we are constantly told are impossible are in fact not only possible but also the whispered secrets of what we are, where we are, and why we are here. This is a book about that Already World.

To my knowledge, nothing like it has ever been attempted. Here, one of the most widely read figures in UFO and abduction literature and a seasoned (take that either way) professor of comparative religion sit down to encounter each other's thought—seriously and respectfully. As the author of the twentieth century's most influential and intimate description of an abduction event, *Communion* (1987), Whitley sets on our shared table his visions of alien spectral figures that seemed at once physical and not physical, at once a thing and a thought, at once sexual and spiritual, at once traumatic and ecstatic. I bring the practices of the professional study of religion to the table in order to explain what historians of religion have written about these paradoxical things (it turns out, *a lot*) and how we might make sense of them without surrendering our critical faculties and understandable skepticism. We work in tandem. We read each other. We rewrite our chapters in the light of what the other has written. In the process, we rewrite ourselves.

The text is at once intimate and professional, both in content and form. Whitley, far from being what he has been portrayed in the media—that is, an advocate for belief in alien abduction—reveals himself in his chapters as a questioning and self-critical nonreligious but spiritual man, telling his story as he has lived it, as a journey through unexplained but extremely powerful perceptions. I take the role of the trained comparativist, framing

my responses to Whitley's narrative through the tools of my trade. I introduce technical terms. I use footnotes. I talk history. I play the professor. I demonstrate how the modern experience of the alien coming down from the sky *can* be compared to the ancient experience of the god descending from the heavens, but not in the ways that are commonly accepted today: "Not as you have been taught," as the letter writer (and now you, as the reader of that letter) is telepathically told in our opening epigraph.

Most of all, I engage Whitley's thought as an intuitive set of comparative and interpretive practices. I demonstrate how Whitley has, all along, been offering us a most radical theory of religion and the human spirit. I make explicit the principles that are implicit in his writing and give these the names and nuances that have been developed in the study of religion over the last two hundred years. Whitley in turn challenges me and, by extension, my field with experienced realities that few intellectuals are prepared to admit exist, much less are willing to study and try to understand: things like the imagination's ability to materialize its content in the physical environment, a home invasion and an implant, the human soul as a real form of energy that is not dependent on the body-brain for its existence, and an emergent mythology that is not entirely imaginary.

As my initial invocation of an apocalypse of thought makes clear, neither of us takes this conversation lightly. Both of us have known professional rejection, religious hate campaigns, censorship, and outright character slander for what we have sincerely thought out loud in the public square. We know perfectly well that what we think cannot be slotted into the present order of scientific knowledge and religious belief. We will not pretend otherwise.

Nevertheless, we want to speak clearly and respectfully to both the open-minded skeptic and the open-minded believer, as we think both have something important to bring to the table. And are we not all believers and skeptics at different moments? The final hope and intended result of this book is not yet another set of pat answers or clear conclusions about strange things. We have no such easy or settled answers. Our intentions for this book are more humble. We want to model a different sort of conversation about the importance of experienced anomalies, one that is more evenhanded, more careful, more intellectually generous, and so more useful.

We want to shift the conversation.

What to Say on a Plane

You have probably heard of Whitley Strieber and know something about what he does. You probably have no idea who I am or what I do. I am not at all sure what to tell you, either.

It is always a problem. I am on a plane. The person sitting next to me asks, "So what do you do?" I quietly groan inside, as I know this will not go well. "I am a professor." That's true enough, but it is also a dodge. I have no idea why I keep using it, since it *never* works. The next question is always the same: "So what do you teach?" I've tried everything: "religion" (not really true), "comparative religion" (a little better), "the history of religions" (a very accurate but uncommon expression) and, finally, "really weird shit" (very accurate, sometimes funny, and immediately understandable). But nothing works in the end. The last response simply elicits a request to be a bit more precise about the weirddom. I eventually have to utter the word "religion." The moment I do, the person puts me, consciously or unconsciously, in a box of his or her choice: the box of the preacher, the believer, or the kook. There is nowhere to go now. The conversation has ended, and "religion" has killed it.

Still, there is an answer to the question of what I do. *I compare things.* To be more precise, as a historian of religions, I compare fantastic states of mind and energy and their symbolic expressions in human history, literature, religion, and art.

These fantastic expressions often appear to issue from, point to, or even try to conjure some other realm or dimension. As such, they commonly violate our assumptions about how the world works. First and foremost, they commonly challenge our most basic assumption that the human being is a subject "in here" looking at a world "out there." Something might zap the body with bizarre energies that in turn affects technology in the immediate environment: the inside now literally resonates with the outside. Or the person might become endowed—temporarily or permanently—with astonishing psychical capacities, X-Men style, that provide accurate information about the empirical world, say, the precise

details of a brother's future funeral, the distant location of a husband killed in a car accident, or the moment-by-moment development of a neighborhood fire miles away in another city.[1]

The historical record is as vast as it is consistent with respect to these real-world superpowers. In every culture of which we have some adequate historical record, we encounter spiritually radiated individuals with miraculous healing capacities, telepathic gifts (what was once called the "reading of hearts"), precognitive abilities (traditionally known as divination or prophecy), clairvoyance (seeing objects or events at a distance in space or time), even, believe it or not, apparent literal floating or flight (levitation). Forget Hollywood. Forget the comic books. Superpowers have been with us for millennia, and they are *real* in the simple sense that people experience them all the time and have reported their effects throughout history.

Some of the remembered effects of these fantastic states of mind and energy have been taken up by extremely elaborate social, political, and artistic processes and have been fashioned by communities into mythical, ritual, and institutional complexes that have fundamentally changed human history. We call these "religions."

Back to the plane and my imagined conversation partner. I suppose I do not really compare these later complexes, these "religions." Rather, I collect and compare the earlier building blocks, the anomalous events or extraordinary experiences that may (or may not) eventually lead to a religious belief or institution.[2] These anomalous building blocks, these tiny personal religions before religion, are historical facts, as real and as important as any other recurring historical fact. *They happen*. What they actually *are* is quite another matter. But here is the thing. If you resist the temptation to believe these events (that is, provide them with some definite religious category, judgment, or interpretation) but instead collect them, arrange them into patterns, and put them all on a flat, fair table to analyze, they remain "super" enough. But they no longer appear to be so odd, and they are certainly no longer "anecdotal," as the debunkers like to label them (as if that intellectual cop-out explains anything at all). Quite the opposite, these super states begin to look like universal, if always morphing, attributes of a shared human mindspace. They begin to look, well, *natural*.

And that is what I really do. I compare fantastic states of mind and energy in order to catch a glimpse of our own super nature, of our own super natural world.

I wish I could say that on a plane.

Meeting Whitley

I first met Whitley in a Walmart in western Pennsylvania. Well, okay, it wasn't really Whitley. It was one of his books, which I saw near the checkout counter. It was probably around 1995 or so, so it was most likely one of his nonfiction books reflecting back on the *Communion* phenomenon. At this point I had no real interest in the book, in the subject of alien abductions, or in the broader UFO phenomenon. None of these things registered in my mind as potential objects of interest, much less of systematic study and professional analysis.

That all changed around 2009 or so, when I picked up *Communion* at the recommendation of a number of colleagues who learned that I was working on a book on the paranormal and popular culture. *Communion*, of course, is the book that recounts Whitley's experience of what he calls "the visitors" during the Christmas holidays of 1985.

What struck me about the book were the various ways that Whitley was engaging my own professional discipline in order to make sense of his traumatic openings and bizarre visions. Basically, he was reading his own abduction experiences by comparing them to similar accounts in the broader history of religions. Out of existential necessity and the transcendent traumas of his own immediate experience, he was implicitly, intuitively practicing the comparative study of religion.

I decided to look and listen. I reminded myself that, as a historian of religions interested in comparative mystical literature, especially of the erotic sort (this is what I wrote about for twenty years), I had some responsibility to do exactly this. After all, if *Communion* is not a piece of modern erotic mystical literature, then I do not know what it is. I'll explain why in due time.

But there was more. It also seemed obvious to me that, *whatever* the ultimate nature of Whitley's experiences, one thing was certain: these types

of extreme events lie at the neurological, psychological, perhaps even electromagnetic origins of many basic religious beliefs that are distributed around the world and have become the building blocks of the religions themselves for millennia. I am thinking here, for example, of the countless mystical encounters with "light," "fire," "radiance," or "power," of the magical or parapsychological capacities attributed to shamans and religious prodigies, or the widespread belief in a separable soul and its ability to leave the body. The latter is an especially common experience that has led in turn to countless belief systems around the immortality or reincarnation of the soul and its various subtle bodies or spiritual "vehicles." If one is interested in how religions develop, then one should be keenly interested in exactly these sorts of extreme experiences, wherever one finds them.

I found them in Whitley. Gradually, over the last five years, I have come to consider him and *Communion* as litmus tests for my field. I have decided that if we, as scholars of religion, cannot take this text seriously, if we cannot interpret it in some satisfying fashion, if we cannot make some sense of this man's honest descriptions of his traumatic, transcendent experiences, then we have no business trying to understand his spiritual ancestors in the historical record. We either put up here, or we shut up there.

I decided to put up.

The Wastebasket Problem

My engagement with Whitley is also part of a conscious research strategy. In his pioneering book *UFOs: Operation Trojan Horse* (1970), John Keel encouraged us almost a half-century ago to stop focusing on the light shows in the sky and start looking closely at the effects that these phenomena have on the witnesses and contactees. The real meaning and purpose of the UFO phenomenon, Keel felt, is not in some machine in the sky. It is in the people who encounter these strange lights and are transformed by them. *The secret of contact lies in the contactee*.

As a historian of religions, I am committed to the human context of any and all religious experience. Whatever the ultimate origin of such events might be, we know of *no* religious experience, scriptural text, or revelation that did not come through a human being or human community.

The UFO phenomenon, of course, much like the human experience of the gods and revelation (indeed, *as* another human experience of the gods and revelation), might end up having something fundamental to do with the nonhuman, the superhuman, or the future-human. That remains to be seen. But, as researchers, we must begin somewhere, and it is better to begin with what one does know and can study than with what one does not know and cannot study.

Which leads me to "the wastebasket problem."[3] Something like the UFO phenomenon is not a single thing. It is a broad set of things that are constantly being confused and mixed up. It is a "wastebasket" category, by which I mean that "UFO" is an umbrella term that encodes a particular cold war military history and encompasses very diverse historical facts, institutions, and experiential events.

Under this broad umbrella, for example, we find: millennia-old folklore currents, particularly around the abductions and otherworlds of faerie lore, as famously pointed out by Jacques Vallee; the physiological condition of sleep paralysis and what my colleague David Hufford calls the "supernatural assault"; elements of traditional Catholic and now Evangelical demonology and angelology; various ancient Gnostic and early modern esoteric teachings; more recent Theosophical and New Age beliefs and channeling practices (significantly, it appears that the early UFO contactee communities of the 1950s helped shape the earlier language of the "channel," from medical clairvoyant Edgar Cayce, into its contemporary use[4]); real secret military projects in multiple countries; U.S. intelligence misinformation campaigns; faked crashes and orchestrated hoaxes; a few modern UFO religions and at least one suicide cult (Heaven's Gate); culturally filtered encounters with balls of apparently conscious plasmalike light variously interpreted as ghost riders, souls, witches, and now UFOs; near-death experiences involving encounters with similar conscious light forms and subsequent "electrified" human bodies that affect electronics and electrical equipment in the environment; a whole range of parapsychological phenomena, including and especially telepathy; perceptual mistakes involving natural metereological and astronomical phenomena and top-secret military technology; hard to dismiss physical sightings by individuals and large groups, including military professionals

and government officials;[5] the stranger details of modern apparitions of the Virgin Mary, some of which eerily reproduce the specific behavior of flying saucers; psychedelia of various sorts, especially around the "little people" and hyperdimensional "elves" of DMT (dimethyltryptamine) and Amazonian ayahuasca shamanism; and literally—and this is no exaggeration—hundreds of thousands of individual contact and abduction experiences, often in bed and often heavily sexualized.

Are all of these things really the same thing? No. Are they somehow nevertheless related? Sometimes. So how do we determine which is which, what belongs where, what to compare with what in order to get where? What should be on our table, for whose interests, and toward what goal or purpose?

To take the most obvious example, it is often assumed that the "things seen in the sky" have some relationship to the occult erotic encounters in bed with various discarnate beings. But this, in fact, is not at all clear. These two sets of events *can* be related within a particular narrative or mythical framework, but this does not require any universal causal relationship between the two, as if the former were somehow always causing the latter. Maybe in some cases they are related. Maybe in others they are not. But certainly not all things seen in the sky are related to all things seen and experienced in the abduction literature.

The UFO phenomenon is confusing, then, first and foremost because we are using a single *very* loose comparative category to collect, classify, and interpret what are probably completely different things. That some of the things in the wastebasket (say, the military disinformation campaigns) appear to be actively mimicking and dissimulating some of the other things in the wastebasket (say, the genuine unexplained aerial phenomena) hardly helps the matter. It only shakes up the wastebasket and makes it messier and more confused.

There is a way forward, though, and we will take it here. That way forward consists of (a) acknowledging the obvious presence of various military-, intelligence-, and security-state measures at work in the cold war history of the UFO phenomenon (the acronym *does*, after all, come from the American military), but (b) setting these aside in order to move beyond and past them to the much older and deeper roots of the encounters in the

global history of mystical and esoteric literature. This simple move solves many problems all at once. It takes us out of areas that this author has no authority over, no knowledge of, and no interest in. It also cleans up *a lot* on our table. Moreover, it allows us to focus on those subjects that we really do know something about and that we can actually study. Here all of those subjects crystallize in a single subject: Whitley Strieber.

How (Not) to Control What's on the Table

There are two basic problems anyone must confront when one attempts to make some sense of this fantastic material. And they come at the reader from opposite directions.

From the first direction, which is the more elite and formidable challenge, one confronts the ideological debunker (as opposed to the fair and open-minded skeptic), standard scientist, or conventional materialist who seeks to protect a flatland materialist worldview by simply *keeping off the table* all of the fantastic stuff that suggests that we are living in a super natural world that is anything but flat. There are many protective strategies employed here. Five of the most common are: (1) the automatic conflation or unconscious identification of science with materialist interpretations of science; (2) the invocation of the adjective "anecdotal" to dismiss these events as somehow meaningless and not part of the real empirical experienced world; (3) a naive understanding of mind that classifies all visionary phenomena as simple "imaginary" products of brain matter (without the slightest clue how this works); (4) the public shaming of sincere and serious people, from all walks of life, who see or say otherwise; and, related to the last, (5) a certain historical amnesia with respect to all of those scientists and intellectuals who have been fascinated by the unexplained and have seen these phenomena not as meaningless anecdotes to dismiss and demean but as important clues to a future superscience.

At the end of the day, though, most of these objections boil down to a simple (and simplistic) attempt *to control what is on the table* so that the only permissible evidence left there is that evidence that supports the materialist assumptions. It is very easy to explain all of reality if you get to

define what that "all" is. It is very easy to explain everything on the table if you have just taken off the table everything that you cannot explain.

Nevertheless, Whitley and I consider the materialist objections to be serious objections. They are certainly the most successful objections. Accordingly, we take them seriously, and we will be addressing them at considerable length as we proceed with our conversation.

How (Not) to Compare What's on the Table

So that is the first basic problem. It will take the book to answer it adequately. There is another problem that can be dealt with more quickly. From the second direction, one confronts the true believer who naively literalizes or mechanizes the UFO visionary encounters and so further confuses what is on the table. Intellectually speaking, this second problem is not as formidable as the first, but it is nevertheless important to address and understand, since it, too, has worked to prevent any adequate public conversation.

This book is my public engagement with what I have elsewhere called the comparative practices of popular culture. By the latter expression, I mean those comparisons performed by individuals who are not professionally trained to compare across cultures and times.[6] I have learned a great deal from these writers. I am grateful, particularly for how they often venture into ideas and areas that no professional historian would dare go, not at least in public. I love that about them.

Having said that, there are other aspects of the comparative practices of popular culture that make me wince, or groan, and that need to be challenged, or at least qualified and better nuanced. I am thinking in particular of two basic ways that individuals have been comparing the ufological material for the last half-century or so. Both are understandable strategies, but both are also flawed. We will need to talk about them in these pages, and we cannot talk about them if they do not have names. So let us call these two strategies *reductive comparison* and *religious comparison*.

Reductive comparison can be pictured as a straight arrow moving from right to left, that is, from a present worldview to a past one. Religious

comparison can be thought of as an equally straight arrow moving from the left to the right, that is, from a past worldview to a present one. As the reversed arrow imagery suggests, these two comparative practices are really not so different from each other. Which is another way of saying that they make the same mistake, if in opposite directions.

Here is how.

Reductive comparison is best exemplified in figures like Erich von Däniken, author of *Chariots of the Gods?* (1968), and his followers. This kind of comparison uncritically assumes the truth and completeness of the present Western worldview and so reads all religious phenomena of the past as misinterpretations of what can only be properly understood from the modern Western scientific worldview. The comparison is "reductive" in the sense that it reduces the surface or mistaken truths of the past worldview to the fuller and deeper truth of the present worldview.

The modern Western worldview has been dominated for the last century or so (a mere blink or wink in the bigger picture) by what has been called "instrumental reason," so named because it wants to turn everything into an instrument or technology. This worldview is materialistic and mechanistic, that is, it insists that all of reality is nothing but matter (that's the materialism part), and that this matter operates through machinelike mathematical laws (that's the mechanism part). The same worldview also commonly asserts that the *only* reliable way to know something about reality is through the scientific method and, more specifically, through mathematics. If something cannot be turned into an object or "thing," replicated and controlled in a laboratory, and measured (that is, assigned a number or mathematical form), it cannot be considered real and so does not deserve our attention or respect. That is a bit of an exaggeration, but not much of one.

The worldview of conventional science, technology, and instrumental reason, of course, is an extremely powerful and useful one. I am by no means against any of this. Quite the opposite. But what is useful is not at all the same thing as what is. Where things go wrong, then, is when individuals take this very modern and very practical way of knowing something about the world and assume that it represents the *whole* world.

Things go more badly still when individuals (who have no training in history or the study of religion) project these very recent (and no doubt very

temporary) assumptions backward into the distant past and advance highly speculative mechanistic and materialistic scenarios. So the universally attested phenomena of magic—whereby a mental event "in here" is astonishingly correlated with a physical event "out there"—becomes nothing more than the misinterpreted effects of an advanced technology. Gods descending from the sky to bestow cultural or practical knowledge become ancient astronauts. Chinese dragons become misperceived spaceships. Mayan funerary art illustrates a rocket ship taking off. And so on. In each case, a religious expression is "reduced" to a distorted technological or material fact.

On the surface, these comparisons are provocative and even sometimes attractive, since the connection that they draw between ancient gods and the modern UFO phenomenon is in fact a plausible one. There *are* some genuinely uncanny comparisons to be drawn here. Still, the way that this approach handles ancient religious texts and artifacts, that is, as relatively unproblematic records of real historical events (records which few if any of the reductive comparativists can actually read in their original languages) is extremely naive.

Moreover, and more seriously still, the *direction* and *meaning* of the connections and comparisons drawn are far from clear or obvious. I mean, why read ancient religious texts through the prism of the UFO as ultra-modern machine? Why not read modern UFO encounters through the prism of ancient religious texts, that is, as discarnate souls, modern gods, or revelation events? In the end, there is no good reason to assume that we just happen to be living in the historical moment that has the privileged view of things. Indeed, there is every clear and good reason to assume that this is not the case.

Religious comparisons—best exemplified in the writing of various Evangelical and fundamentalist authors who interpret UFOs and aliens as portents of the end of the world and/or as demons—make the exact opposite comparative move. They uncritically assume the truth and completeness of a past worldview (in this case, a diverse collection of ancient Near Eastern cultures embedded in the biblical texts) and read all the UFO phenomena of the present from these past mythical and religious assumptions.

The ancient biblical worldview was dominated by the assumed presence of invading spirits and demons, which functioned as the standard

explanation at that time for disease and mental illness. Hence possession was understood to be the cause of the illness and exorcism was the cure. More problematic still, such demons also entered the early Christian practices of "comparing religions." In these early comparative practices of popular culture, the gods of other peoples and cultures were not genuine gods or sincere expressions of some greater God. They were demons. They were evil. These demonic readings, then, made good emotional sense of the destructive aspects of disease and mental illness, but they also functioned as a way of literally demonizing other religious communities. This same demonic reading of other people's religious experiences would also lead to later historical horrors, like the early modern persecution of witches in Europe and colonial America.

Unfortunately, that is not an exaggeration at all.

Having said all of that, there are aspects of both the reductive and religious comparisons that are attractive and that actually work to our benefit in particular contexts.

To take a single example (we will get to others in the pages that follow), it *is* remarkable and surely significant that particular religious visions of the past look like visions of some kind of living machine or conscious technology.[7] The famous vision of Ezekiel in the first few chapters of the biblical book of the same name is a very good example. The Jewish traditions have understood those chapters as revealed descriptions of a divine "chariot" and have made them central to their own versions of the mystical life, hence the "chariot mysticism" of ancient Judaism. But, clearly, whatever the prophet saw within his own "abduction" experience, it was no chariot. Not even close. Any honest reader can see that, immediately. Unsurprisingly, the biblical book itself never uses the word "chariot."

It is also worth keeping in mind here that the Jewish tradition has long recognized that the first chapters of Ezekiel are among the strangest and most dangerous chapters in the entire Hebrew Bible. Moreover, it has often sought to restrict access to them, particularly among the young and unprepared. There is even a well-known rabbinic text that tells about a child who accidentally read these chapters and was consumed by fire that burst

from the holy pages. We need not be Jewish or Hebrew readers to detect an important lesson there.

But even with the conscious machines of the history of religions we have to be very careful. Something like the very traditional Jewish (mis)metaphor of the chariot, after all, should give us deep pause, as the rabbis, kabbalists, and ancient readers who invoked it were doing more or less what the modern reductive comparisons are doing today. They were taking the cutting-edge technology of their own place and time (in their case, the chariot) and reading it into an extraordinary visionary scene where it really does not work or belong. Clearly, when individuals invoke "spaceships," "ancient astronauts," and "extraterrestrials" today (all aspects of our present modernist culture and science-fiction literature) to describe past visionary events, they are doing the same thing. Basically, they are invoking chariots. They are drawing the same straight arrow from their own relative present to some past event or text. They are misreading the past through the lens of the present. They are doing something similar, of course, when they read modern UFO encounters as ultramodern machines. Here they are misreading the present through the lens of the present.

And although the overwhelming consensus of scholarship on the Hebrew Bible is that the first few chapters of Ezekiel record an actual reported vision, do we need to be reminded that a text is not the same thing as a historical event, that stories in texts, even biblical texts, often never happened at all?

The religious comparisons can also be helpful, particularly to the extent that they work to challenge the simplistic technological readings of the reductive comparisons. The latter "nuts and bolts" readings of UFOs (whereby the UFO is a physical, objective machine), for example, inevitably cherry pick the ufological literature and concentrate on those encounters or sightings that look very much like technological encounters. Many of them indeed do.

But then what to do with the simple facts that these things in the sky do things that no machine can do, that they behave more like thoughts than things? And what to do with the little and big humanoids and, as John Keel continuously reminded us in order to *really* mess things up, the hairy and winged monsters often seen in association with the crafts? And this is before we get to the elaborate descriptions of the humanoids' apparent

abilities to walk through walls, float, read minds, paralyze people, disappear into thin air, and so on. Are not all of these abilities traditional magical powers? And are not all of these powers common features of the gods in cultures like ancient Greece and traditional Hindu India?[8] In other words, these encounters *do* look like religious encounters. The religious comparisons, like the reductive comparisons, have a real point.

But the question remains: Which way do we shoot the arrow of comparison and interpretation?

The Future of the Past

The short answer is: "both ways."

The longer answer is: "it's complicated."

The truth is that the comparative practices that Whitley and I will be performing in the pages that follow are neither purely reductive nor religious. We will privilege neither our modern world's materialism and mechanisms nor the mythical and religious assumptions of some past worldview, since all of these are clearly relative to their place and time, *as is our own*. It is precisely this acute awareness of the relativity of any perspective, of *any* point in space-time, that makes things so complicated and rich.

We will draw comparative lines between the past and the present, then, but we will "shoot the arrow both ways." By doing this, we will allow the religious comparisons to challenge the reductive ones, and we will allow the reductive comparisons to challenge the religious ones. But we will privilege neither. If we need a visual image here, we might replace our two straight arrows with a time loop circling back and forth as it moves up and forward in a kind of spiraling progression. Not a straight arrow but an upward spiral, then.

Elsewhere, I have written of "the future of the past" to capture this progressive spiraling model of historical thinking and interpretation.[9] By this paradoxical expression, I mean that we need to come to terms with the simple fact that, yes, we can now read the past in ways that past peoples could not read their own presents. *Our future changes the meanings of their*

past. But any adequate understanding of their past will also inevitably challenge our own present assumptions about the world *and so change the meanings of our present*. There is no straight arrow here. There is a kind of recurring time loop, a constant return to the past in order to reassess and recalibrate the present toward a different kind of future. Anyone who works seriously with historical materials is familiar with these interpretive paradoxes.

Think this is the stuff of academic eggheads and so irrelevant to the subject at hand? Think again. These sorts of interpretive paradoxes and historical loops are *integral features of the contact experiences themselves*. Indeed, the contact literature has only radicalized the possibilities of this future of the past. In many of these events, after all, the implication is that *we* are in the past being visited by future humans, who are contacting and abducting us toward, we can only assume (or hope), some kind of recalibration or adjustment.[10] Consider lines like this one, from Whitley's *The Secret School*: "The vague mythological beings of the past that have focused into the aliens of the present will soon become our selves as we become the very time travelers whose shadows haunt all our history, including the present."[11]

That is the kind of mind-bending comparative practice that we are after here. To really name it, define it, and practice it, however, will take the work of both an experiencer and a theorist working together, in deep conversation and mutual criticism. This is the spirit of our undertaking. Our mutual wager is that, by "shooting the arrow both ways," by practicing the paradoxes of "the future of the past," by "sitting with the question" instead of landing on some stock rational or religious answer, a *third* kind of gnosis or new superknowledge will eventually emerge, one that can encounter a strange being in the bedroom without labeling that presence an angel *or* an alien, much less a demon, hallucination, or anecdote.[12] "Not as you have been taught."

Hence our title: *The Super Natural*. With this little provocation, effected by the tiniest and humblest of moves (a single thumb tap on the laptop's space bar), we move beyond both the flatland materialism of scientism (the natural) and the naive literalisms of certain types of religion (the supernatural). Within that tiny gap or space, we seek another different

kind of answer or, at the very least, another way of asking the questions, one that is deeply material and deeply spiritual at the same time.

Hence the new world that has arrived with this book but that has also always been here. Hence the Already World, the natural world that is really and truly a super natural world.

2

Into the Woods

WHITLEY

The human mind spent many thousands of years explaining the mysteries and vagaries of nature as the outcomes of various enchantments, the actions of gods and demons in human affairs, to be managed by ritual and worship. The Renaissance brought reason, the enlightenment that followed the freeing disciplines of structured academic inquiry and scientific method. Gradually, superstitions about everything from seasonal changes to the appearance of diseases and natural disasters and much else gave way to logic and scientific understanding.

However, there is one area that remains outside of understanding, and which is by far the most culturally potent of them all. In the past it manifested in the form of mysterious beings, strange lights, and ghostly presences. St. Paul encountered it on the road to Damascus when he was startled by a flash of light and a voice, an event that changed the world. Earlier, Moses encountered it in the form of a burning bush, with equally dramatic effect on our culture. It is what we now call the supernatural. It has reemerged in the form of the alien and UFO stories that abound in our time, and threatens to degenerate into a new superstition if it does not receive the study necessary to determine what it actually is.

Previously, this aspect of nature—for that is what it is—had to be entirely rejected as there was no avenue of approach that would enable empirical study of it, and therefore any acknowledgment of it by science threatened the possibility that its manifestations would be taken to be what we believed them to be, simply because they were being studied.

That has changed. Moses, Paul, and all the others who encountered such manifestations in the past saw something, just as people who encounter UFOs, orbs of light, and aliens do today. I have seen them and interacted with them for years. Millions of others have. What we are seeing now is very much what our ancestors saw. The only things new are the names, and with them a visual grammar that fits our imagination, now directed toward creatures from other planets rather than heaven and hell. But one thing is clear: what we see now is just as convincing of its otherness to us as what our ancestors saw was to them.

As this point in our intellectual and scientific evolution, it seems possible to study this material without recourse to beliefs, old or new. We have both the intellectual and scientific tools needed to, in effect, bring reason to enchantment. Now, we can understand.

In February of 2015, presidential adviser John Podesta tweeted that his greatest regret of 2014 was that he had failed to get the government to release the information it possesses about UFOs. But how can such information be released into the current intellectual and scientific climate? We are not prepared to respond meaningfully, with the result that the information is likely to be taken by the public at face value as proof that aliens are here.

Not too surprising. Given the number of unusual sightings and encounters that have taken place over the past seventy years, most people assume that UFOs mean extraterrestrials. But do they? In fact, we don't yet know enough to be certain of anything in this area, except that unexplained objects do occasionally appear in the sky and many people, me included, have experiences that seem to involve interaction with nonhuman beings.

Having been the object of their visitations over a period of years, and the recipient of hundreds of thousands of narratives from others who had similar experiences, I wish to suggest from the outset that the phenomenon is much larger than any of the usual explanations, including alien visitation and such interpretations as brain seizure. It is far richer, more complex, and

more ambiguous than we commonly suppose, and is, with or without governmental revelations about UFOs, in the process of changing us and our world, as it has been doing not just since the first modern flying saucer sightings seventy years ago, but also for thousands of years, and maybe ever since we first noticed the stars in the night, and wondered at the flicker of moonlight on restless water, or the mysterious passage of the sun.

Assuming that UFOs and alien encounters are related, it is not simply a matter of beings from another planet coming here as explorers. They did not act, in my encounters with them, like explorers in any easily understood sense, nor, in my experience, are they aliens in the way that is commonly assumed. But that does not mean they emerge from our minds and nowhere else, nor does it mean that the one possible explanation that cannot be true is that they are beings who originated on other planets.

This universe is absolutely immense and incredibly ancient. I would never dismiss the idea that aliens from other planets are here, or may come here. It's just that this is not proven, at least not outside the community of secret-keepers to which Mr. Podesta referred in his tweet, and until there is proof, it is only one of a number of possibilities. More important, even if aliens are riding around in the unidentified flying objects that Mr. Podesta claims are the target of so much secrecy, an alien presence here is unlikely to be the whole of it.

"They" represent the largest, strangest, most dangerous, and potentially most fruitful experience humanity has ever faced—as, indeed, they always have. What "they" are, though, is an unanswered question. Whatever they are, my persistence in attempting to interact with them resulted in what I can interpret as a structured process during which they at once led me to deeper understanding and more provocative questions. This has led me to explore in ways that seem new but evolved out of age-old methods of truth-seeking, the nature of the world, the reality of experience, and, above all, the mystery of what we are. Most of my nonfiction from *Communion* on reflects my attempts to make sense of this. I would hope that my focus, in this text, will signal that a greater clarity has emerged out of these years of research and reflection.

It is one thing for the government to reveal that UFOs are intelligently guided objects of unknown origin and another to assume that this means that "they" are here. Should we ever come into more general contact with

what I encountered—assuming that is even possible—they will not be offering us plans for a starship, or a trade in exotic electronics. What will be on offer, I would suggest, is a journey into a whole new understanding of reality and the part we play in it. The "alien" is as much a herald from the dark of the universe as it is a signal from the depths of our own minds. The discovery of the reality behind UFO and alien apparitions and the discovery of our own truth will prove to be profoundly intertwined. When this discovery is finally made, we will at that moment become immeasurably larger. Free at last from the constricted vision that now so limits us, we will begin the journey toward which we have been struggling from time immemorial, into a new relationship with the universe and a new understanding of mind and the natural world.

No matter what sort of disclosures may be made, there will prove to be no government documents that define for us the new world that is on offer. As we collectively enter the school that will be opening its doors to us, we will find that we have been limiting our own vision of reality, and that the limits we have set simply do not apply.

I don't believe in the supernatural or the paranormal, but I do feel strongly that these terms are used in our materially focused culture to explain away phenomena that are in some way real, but which have so far eluded understanding.

I have lived a life filled with such phenomena and often encounter ghosts, aliens, and all manner of apparently supernatural beings. To make this more difficult, at least for me, there has been a wealth of personal witness to my experiences. Had it not been for the friends who had experiences, for example, at my cabin in upstate New York, I would have dismissed many of them. But the experiences are simply too common for me to reject. The phenomena causing them exist. Or is it a single phenomenon that appears in many different ways?

But just because a thing is witnessed by more than one observer does not mean that it is understood. It can be understood, as Jeff points out, in the context of whatever "present" one happens to live in, but that doesn't mean that flying saucers and aliens are the final truth any more than were past interpretations. At different times, I have convinced myself of many different things regarding what I was perceiving and experiencing. But all of those explanations—aliens, interdimensional beings, other earthly

intelligent species, ghosts, deities, time travelers, seizure effects (it's a long list)—have proved to be unsatisfactory or incomplete in one way or another. Aliens both are and are not aliens, for example. Ghosts are both real and illusory, something like reflections. But it is possible to look beyond the theories and assumptions. It is possible to bring elements of the wider reality—albeit fragmentary ones—into perception, and to learn to live in this broader context. Not only that, "it" can and will respond by penetrating into the physical world, by coming into contact, by offering itself on many different levels, ranging from the transcendently transformative to the desperately dangerous, and all manner of shadings in between. As long as one does not try to force it into some reductionist structure or other, there is much to be learned—and, frankly, much fun to be had, especially if one has a taste for danger.

When I responded to the initial physical overtures of what I call "the visitors," as violent as they were, the reaction was to offer me what has become years of coherently structured instruction in an entirely new way of life that penetrates the barrier of assumptions that so limit our vision and restrict our access to reality . . . unless, of course, I am looking into a mirror more deeply than is wise.

I hope that my unwillingness to address it through the filter of beliefs, assumptions, and, above all, appearances has enabled me to focus on this reality in a clearer way. I don't think that I am perceiving the supernatural, but rather, as Jeff has so adroitly expressed it, the super natural, that which is part of nature but works by rules that are different from those we are familiar with. So I don't see it through the lens of religion or myth or superstition, but rather through eyes that look at the immensity of reality and see aspects of being that are living by a physics that we apparently do not fully understand, but which, in the end, is knowable. I do not see it as being overseen by a final being, or god. We the living, in all our ancient vastness, are all that is here. But by living, I don't mean only physically alive. There is more to life, my experiences tell me, much more.

In late December of 1985 I was awakened by strange noises in my little rural cabin. I found myself surrounded by odd and menacing figures. I'd felt that I was being carried, then manhandled, and then I was in what I initially thought was a tent. It was full of distinctly nonhuman creatures, some of them capering stick insects, others squat, frog-faced trolls who

were a deep iridescent blue. As a sometime horror novelist, I was initially delighted by this useful dream. But when I tried to wake up, the horror became real. I kept trying to make my bed appear around me, but it would not. I wasn't in my bed and I could not conjure it by simply willing it to be there. I heard a softly robotic female voice repeating over and over, "What can we do to help you stop screaming?"

A series of spectacularly bizarre and terrifying events then took place, unfolding at once as a horror movie, a grim fairy tale, a nightmare, and a viscerally real, physically painful experience.

The next morning I awoke feeling beaten up, but confused about why that would be. Over the next few days, I would begin to recall somebody pushing a needle into my head, and feeling what my doctor would later say looked like a spider bite. More disturbingly, the rectal agony that would later be universally lampooned began to torment me.

During the day, I became convinced that an owl had come to our bedroom window, even that it had gotten in the house—and, with that, began to receive my first communication in a very new language, that of the visitors. I did not know it at the time, but subsequently I have come to understand that by identifying themselves with owl imagery, as they have done in my and innumerable other lives, the visitors have said something. They have suggested that it might be useful in understanding them to look to the owl both as an animal and a mythological creature. By doing so, it is possible, I suspect, to hear them explaining themselves. Wise and dangerous birds, night flyers, all seeing and immeasurably capable, but also vulnerable.

In the days after my 1985 experience, my memories began to focus more, and they were extremely strange. I saw big, glaring insect eyes. I recalled short, dark blue figures racing around me at breakneck speed. I recalled that I had been treated very roughly.

At first, I thought that I'd been the victim of a crime. I had recently co-authored a controversial book called *Warday* that had annoyed some government officials because it gave the lie to their dangerous and absurd push to destabilize cold war détente. Had vindictive officials had me drugged and beaten up to terrorize me, or even to drive me mad, or, if I dared speak about it, to guarantee that I would be discredited? (If that was

the motive, it certainly worked. My efforts to describe my experiences publicly and accurately have profoundly compromised my credibility.)

I recalled seeing a familiar face during the initial stages of the experience—a school friend who had joined the Central Intelligence Agency. But when I tried to look him up, I was appalled and confused to discover that he had died months before the night in question.

So then I decided that I must have had a psychotic episode, and never mind my injuries, which had been quite apparent in the following days. These injuries included an aching malaise, as if I'd been roughly treated, a needle mark in the side of my head, and the rectal injury.

I did not want to face these injuries. I did not want to deal with the possibility that the experience had been physical. A visit to my doctor was extremely unsettling, largely because he not only saw the injuries as physical, but when I described my memories said, "It sounds like you're saying you were taken aboard a flying saucer by little men."

We agreed that psychological tests should be the next step. However, they revealed only a high stress level. Then I thought perhaps it was a seizure that had manifested itself as a vivid hallucination, but a test for temporal lobe epilepsy indicated that I had a brain that was not only normal but also exceptionally resistant to seizures. An MRI scan revealed no sign of any illness that might account for my perceptions.

Thus began what has become the odyssey of my life. Although I have been identified as the primary advocate for belief in alien abduction—and have at times publicly entertained this notion—for the most part, I have tried to adhere to the question. The alien explanation—while fascinating and touched by deliciously uneasy romance—has, from the beginning, made me wary. There are elements of the experience that are so fantastic and so improbable, but so consistent, that some much more complex event than alien scientists visiting Earth must be taking place.

But the debate, such as it is, remains as it has been since the first flying saucer reports appeared back in the 1940s: either this must involve space travelers from some other planet, or it's all a load of rubbish. For the most part, scientists and intellectuals come down on the "load of rubbish" side of the equation and decline to inquire further. UFO researchers seek to confirm the alien hypothesis. The people who have actually had unexplainable experiences of the phenomena in question are generally confused, bemused,

and unconvinced by the arguments being put forth on both sides. It's not nothing. Something happens and it is not confined to the mind. It isn't hallucinatory. Neither, however, is it real in the same way that we are real, not exactly.

Most paranormal phenomena are addressed by this same debate. Either they are "real" and therefore exactly what they seem to be, or it's all nonsense. The ghost is either there or it isn't. The elf is either a real flesh and blood creature or it doesn't exist. There cannot be consciousness or coherent being outside of the physical—which is, in fact, what I want to believe. Unfortunately for me, though, it simply is not my perception. Despite the fact that I can't explain them, I frequently see and interact with nonphysical and quasi-physical beings. They seem to be part of nature just like we are, but, as Jeff advocates, in some "super" way for which we have neither an adequate religious model nor present science.

They also have, at least in my life, what has come to seem a rather clear aim. They want to challenge me with questions too provocative to be left unanswered, but which I cannot, in all frankness, answer in anything approaching an objective manner. I'm not like the old prophets who saw them as angels and deities, or modern advocates of alien contact, who see them as extraterrestrials. They are in my life, but I don't know what they are.

In fact, they are involved with me right now, as I am writing. After I had finished this introduction and was beginning my first experiential chapter, which is primarily focused on a type of alien that is also a troll called in folklore a kobold, another sort of little person appeared in my life. On the very morning that I started writing about little blue men, Linda Moulton Howe, who is a long time observer and professional reporter in the field of the paranormal, sent me a group of three trail camera photographs of what appeared to be a classic garden gnome, complete with red vest and tall, pointed hat. At first, of course, I assumed that this was exactly what it was—a garden gnome suspended from a string.

Work with a photography expert soon told a different story. First, the figure was blurred and thus moving fast. It wasn't swinging in an arc but walking on two spindly legs. It was forty-four inches tall, a typical height for all of these small beings. It had stopped moving forward the moment the camera took its first picture, then beat a retreat at a high rate of speed. The

camera, activated by movement and heat, takes a photo every second until the movement stops. There was no evidence that the photo was hoaxed, or that the image on it was anything known.

Now, if we apply the old methods, we must conclude either that garden gnomes are real creatures, or that this is some sort of a hoax, or perhaps a shot of a common animal whose appearance has been distorted by a trick of light. I could add paragraphs here, calling on the testimony of photographic experts to show why it can be neither a hoax nor a distortion, but why bother? I'd prefer to let that sort of debate wander off down its meaningless pathway on its own, frankly.

It is possible to apply new methods to the enigma, which would involve attempting to find what I would describe as more energetic questions, in the sense that they would have more potential to meaningfully dimensionalize the mystery.

Discovering such questions is not going to be easy, given that we have never searched the supernatural for an inner logic, but only argued about it, at least in the public forum, in the most simplistic way. In the academy and the professional study of religion, of course, a much more sophisticated debate has been going on for a hundred and fifty years, but that debate has hardly penetrated public perception, which remains bound to the either/or proposition.

So there I was, dealing with a photo of what appeared to be a real gnome. The picture had been taken in July, but time and chance had dropped it into my inbox at precisely the most provocative moment.

But why? Or is there a why? Is some hidden level of mind asking me to become an advocate for the reality of garden gnomes? Or are we seeing a droll challenge from this other level, one that is suggesting that we really do need to think about the whole subject in a new way? And perhaps, also, a little less ponderously. The images in all their ambiguity, with all their implications and their deep hilarity, are there to be faced with an open mind, and I think some laughter would be appropriate, too.

After I realized that my 1985 experience was a true mystery, I began compulsively going out into the woods around the cabin where it happened —quite a large woodland, in fact—and attempting to somehow face it again. At the same time, I wrote and published my book about it called

Communion, the reaction to which was easily as unexpected as the experience itself.

Had you asked me prior to the release of the book how many people might claim similar experiences, I would have estimated the number in the hundreds. I'd met twelve or fifteen, and knew of perhaps thirty others.

Then the letters started coming in, at first by the hundreds, then the thousands, then a great cataract of letters, easily ten thousand a month, from all over the world. The publisher told me that the book was selling far beyond even their most optimistic expectations.

Previously, the close encounter experience had been assumed to be a rare and eccentric anomaly. Accounts were dismissed as isolated anecdotes, not worth pursuing scientifically because of a lack of consistent data.

I was deeply moved, not to say shocked, to see that I had uncovered a human experience of vast size that was completely hidden. Far from parroting versions of my own experience, my correspondents revealed that they were perceiving an extremely complex phenomenon that involved hundreds of different types of events. They were linked by certain commonalities, most often the seeing of a face, long and thin with great, dark eyes, like the one I'd had painted for the cover of the book.

The letters were, many of them, articulate and detailed. At the time, the skeptics community was advocating that the alien abduction accounts were being induced in susceptible people by the use of hypnosis. This was concerning to me, because there were indeed amateur hypnotists who were convinced that the phenomenon was caused by interactions with aliens, who were actively hypnotizing people and possibly distorting their memories. I had myself been hypnotized, but by Dr. Donald Klein, a leading practitioner of forensic hypnosis who had solved numerous criminal cases with his techniques. Neither of us, at the time he began hypnotizing me, believed in the "alien abduction" scenario.

My correspondents, however, had for the most part never had hypnosis or any kind of professional support. They had never heard of UFO investigators or organizations like the Mutual UFO Network. They told, time and again, stories that were strange beyond strange. Between 1987 and 2000, we must have received well in excess of half a million letters, at least a hundred thousand of them detailed accounts. I understand that this seems like a fantastic number, but it is probably accurate. We stopped counting at

two hundred thousand, and that was in 1992, and they were still arriving in surprising numbers as late as 1998. We have kept around thirty thousand on file.

Anne, who read them all, compiled a book called *The Communion Letters* that includes a little over a hundred of them, chosen because they contained examples of typical experiences, and were quite well written.

Obviously, I was not dealing with isolated anecdotes. There was a wealth of material here for study by neurologists, psychiatrists, and sociologists. To expedite this, I created the Communion Foundation. However, I found that I could get no support. There was not just no scientific interest, but the reaction was often hostile. And why not? A scientist seeking to study such people, as doctors John Mack and Roger Leir discovered, could expect to have their professional credentials challenged if they dared propose such study, or worse, engage in it.

I very well remember the day that Dr. Mack called me and told me that both his license to practice psychiatry and his tenure at Harvard were under review. Later, the very man who led this attack became an ally of Dr. Mack's, but it was initially a very dangerous situation for him. Dr. Leir told me that he was also the subject of such attacks.

Sadly, over the years, I was unable to successfully communicate the reality of this fantastic outpouring of witness. Most members of the academic, scientific, and intellectual communities, let alone our serious media, have to this day no idea how extensive the experience actually is.

So we're still at the beginning of the journey when it comes even to finding useful questions, let alone viable answers.

Surely that can change, but not unless the most interesting aspect of the phenomenon, which is its ambiguity, is to replace the either/or debate. For example, there is a rich trove of physical evidence that something strange is afoot, but also a rich trove of evidence that clearly emerges out of folklore, with a strong strain of myth in the mix.

Whatever happened to me on the night of December 26, 1985, there was enough physical trauma to send me to the doctor a few days later, who observed that I had been raped. Unfortunately for me, I was so humiliated by this that I described it in *Communion*—delicately, I thought—as a "rectal probe." The result was that, instead of being treated with the sensitivity one might think would be due a rape victim, I was made a figure of fun. Still, I

could not bear to admit it, not even knowing that doing so would have rescued me from the trauma of being ridiculed for my suffering. It took me a quarter of a century to even describe the experience as a rape to my wife. It was during this period that I became identified as an advocate of the alien abduction scenario. I could not refute it, because it might be at least partially true. So I won't say that, at times, I haven't been seduced by it, because it does have its appeal. But that core of distrust has never left me. My reason for this is not the one usually advanced, that "they couldn't possibly get here." Given the age of the universe and its immensity, I wouldn't be in the least surprised if somebody has figured out interstellar travel, even if, for us, it is impossible.

In any case, I, who stated in large type on the inside front cover of *Communion* that "the enigmatic presence of the human mind winks back from the dark," have ended up closely identified with one side of a debate between two propositions, one of which I find insupportable and the other open to question.

Why, though, would somebody who suffered such unpleasant physical consequences, and later had to face such a cloud of witness, attribute his experience in any way to the human mind?

I don't mean that it's entirely in the mind, but rather that the mind might not be entirely in us. In other words, mind might not be entirely confined to the brain. Since the moment that I began to apprehend the actual dimensions of the experience in all its wonderful improbability and confusing physicality, I have been dogged by that improbability. I can't get away from it though. My intellect says that it cannot be true. My life bears witness to its truth.

If mind does exist independent of biology, then, given the conservation of energy, it is likely to be rather old, and given its lack of confinement in the body, limited, if at all, in unknown ways. Considering that this universe is at least thirteen billion years old, and that there is increasing evidence that it might not be the only one out there, it is liable, also, to have a good deal of experience.

What would it be like, then? What would our part in it be? How would we communicate with the aspects of it, which must be vast, that have nothing to do with us? And yet, when we do manage to communicate with it as something that seems separate from us, to what degree would we

actually be talking to ourselves? Given what would have to be a very ancient presence, is physical life an outcome of some plan it has? If so, what might that be? What need has it to have drawn us into being, or rather, to have injected itself into physical bodies? What does time mean to such a thing, and is it creator or created, or both?

I cannot answer these questions, and they might not even be the right ones. I am not a believer in any hypothesis. On the contrary, I am a wanderer, lost in the forest of hypotheses.

I cannot tell you how to escape, but I can tell you that it's a terribly interesting place. It's full of aliens; ghosts; sexy succubae and incubi; fairy-folk; demanding and inconsiderate gods, angels, demons, and growling subterranean kobolds—and, it would seem, garden gnomes. In fact, there are too many other forms to list, as well as some that cannot be defined beyond saying that one sometimes senses presences beyond description.

My direct questions are these: Why do we see all of these things; and why and how do they sometimes interact with us in enough of a physical way to leave injuries, have sex, and, in some cases such as my own, leave demonstrably bizarre physical objects in the body, not to mention perplexed witnesses? In my chapter on implants, I will describe them in more detail.

Once one opens one's mind to the notion that these mysteries are worth consideration, one takes the first baby step into the forest. At once, the paths proliferate. Not only that, the forest is very much alive, growing and changing all the time. And the paths—they change, too. The shadowy presences in the sacred groves of antiquity, Dante's lost path, more humble journeys such as my own, ridden with fear and driven by compulsion—these are the journeys in the forest of mind.

It has keepers, you know. Foresters, if you will. They're a pretty rough bunch, and pretty strange, and I suspect that they are the arbiters of souls, much like the growling, groaning creatures that appeared from the depths in the delightful movie *Ghost*.

Over the course of this volume, as my contribution, I am going to reconstruct my and others' experiences in a new way, in exchange with Jeff, attempting to reveal the large-scale structures that are present beneath the chaotic narrative surface. For such structures most certainly exist. As I have said, I can look at my whole experience as an education, with a definite point of matriculation, various classes, and eventual graduation into my life

as it is now, trying one path after another in this dangerous, delightful, and deliciously mysterious woodland.

Maybe, on the night of December 26, 1985, I was in an alien spaceship and maybe I wasn't, but I was certainly in a very agitated state, and getting more panicked with every moment that the impossible scene around me came into greater focus.

After the robotic female voice began trying to comfort me, an event happened that would prove to be of fundamental importance to my ideas of what this might all mean. This was the approach of a unique form of creature, who, like the more familiar willowy gray ones with the large eyes, has a distinct and deeply embedded place in folklore.

A squat blue man came up to me. He carried a silver device in his hand, the "rectal probe." Subsequently, I found that models are marketed both for erotic stimulation and for use in animal husbandry. They work by stimulating the vagus nerve.

As one of these beings proceeded with the electrostimulation, another busied himself inserting a long needle into my temple. I cried out, "You'll ruin a beautiful mind," as I both felt the needle piercing me and endured the embarrassing penetration of my anus.

At the same time that the electrostimulation was taking place, there was a sample taken of my fecal matter. I was confused to see that I was experiencing an erection, and disturbed when there was an ejaculation—then appalled to see the semen being collected into a tube by one of the capering insectoid monstrosities with the bulging eyes. The ejaculation didn't come with any emotional affect and very little sensation. The whole sexual event was so dissociated that it might as well have been happening to another person.

It is an easy thing to jump to the conclusion that I am claiming here that I was abducted by aliens and had semen stolen by them, but I am not claiming that. I am reporting a perception, not making a claim, and there is a world of difference between those two approaches. While I came away with clear physical injuries, as we shall soon see, there were elements of the experience—that are also integral to the whole "alien abduction" phenomenon—that challenge to its core the very meaning of what we perceive as "physical."

One reason that I doubt that aliens have flown here from someplace like Zeta Reticuli to study us is that the contact experience includes two seemingly disparate aspects: encounters with the dead and encounters with nonhuman beings.

Until the discovery, originally made by Anne Strieber as she read all those thousands of letters, that the dead and aliens seemed often to show up together in the lives of witnesses, the two phenomena were assumed to be entirely separate. The folklore of alien contact and the folklore of spirit manifestation were unrelated. What possible connection could there be between alien scientists from another planet and ectoplasmic manifestations of dear aunt Ethel?

Now, before I continue, I want to define my position very carefully. I am, in my heart, a secular individual, but I do consider it possible, based on personal experience, that there may be conscious being outside of the body. I am willing to entertain the notion, in fact, that the physical world may be embedded in a much larger, older, and more intelligent energetic consciousness. If so, then the true journey of cultural and religious history is about our long struggle to come to terms with it, and find a way to objectively include it in our understanding of reality.

We started the journey on our knees, cowering before the ruthless and intemperate gods of antiquity. We followed our many religions deeper into the forest, until finally that path played out, disappearing into the current dark mutter of ritual, sloganizing, and murder. Now we are at a crucial turning point. Either we journey on, this time along the secular path, or we take another fork, embarking on an even darker, more dangerous, and twisted journey.

Paradoxically, I am rather sure that this secular path through the impossible—the most ill-marked and twisted of them all—opens eventually into the sunlight of a clear and objective understanding of what we are, where we are, and why we are here.

3

Making the Cut

JEFF

It is an easy thing to jump to the conclusion that I am claiming here that I was abducted by aliens and had semen stolen by them, but I am not claiming that. I am reporting a perception, not making a claim, and there is a world of difference between those two approaches.

Whitley Strieber is a phenomenon, a kind of religious prodigy without a religion who cannot help engaging classic religious questions and themes, since that is what his experiences clearly invoke. The last lines of the preceding chapter voice these perennial religious questions perfectly: he seeks an objective answer to the hymning questions of "what we are, where we are, and why we are here." Obviously, the emphasis is on that "we," that is, on our own human nature.

Or super nature.

The human-centered focus of the inquiry speaks volumes. What Whitley really seems to want is not a new religion but a new science, one that can take extreme religious experiences (out-of-body and near-death experiences, precognitions, moments of clairvoyance, and visions of the dead) as privileged data about the deepest nature of mind or consciousness, which is to say about "what we are, where we are, and why we are here." I

think he is right about that. I have said as much many times in very public places.[13]

We are not anti-science. Quite the contrary. We simply want a science that is honest and brave enough to take in *all* that human beings experience without immediately explaining away that "all and everything" by some easy pat answer that is really no answer at all. The Harvard psychologist and philosopher William James had a wonderful expression for such a future science. He dreamed of a "radical empiricism," that is, one that took *every* human experience, however strange or apparently impossible, under its careful gaze without prejudice or assumption. This book is an attempt to practice just such a radical empiricism.

Experience as Experiment

But how?

Whitley's intellectual orientation, "lost in a forest of hypotheses," is a very good example of what one of my colleagues, Alex van der Haven, calls the "hypothetical supernatural." Alex means something very specific by this curious phrase. He means to refer to all of those modern individuals who have known their own personal revelations but do not want to believe or accept them prematurely. Rather, they want to question them, test them. Put most simply, they want to turn their own mystical "experiences" into scientific "experiments."

In Alex's terms, they want to take their own apparently religious experiences not as absolute-truth claims but as testable hypotheses. This is why these modern mystics care so little for religious institutions and care so much for professional science. They literally want to be tested (hence Whitley's various submissions to MRIs, psychiatric examinations, and temporal lobe tests). They want the truth to be known. This is also why they are so hurt when professional scientists do not return their confidence and, instead, heap insults on them and their experiences. The modern visionaries embrace science, but the conventional scientists too often respond with a sneer.

In his own way of putting it, Whitley writes of wanting "to sit with the question," of leaving the question open and learning to live with the ambiguity. He wants to do this not as a compromise, but as a mirroring response to what these experiences/experiments clearly intend: *they themselves are ambiguous and paradoxical*. Hence his identification of this same ambiguity as "the most interesting aspect of the phenomenon" and his call that we embrace this and that we abandon the terms of the "false either/or debate" that has taken place so far, with its two unworkable and untenable positions: there are space aliens among us, or it's all rubbish.

From the Paranormal to the Super Natural

Whitley and I disagree about some things. Being writers, we also care very much about words. The word "paranormal" is one of the things we disagree about. Whitley's rejection of the paranormal in his opening lines as more or less the same thing as the supernatural is certainly accurate enough within today's very loose use of the paranormal in the tabloids and in horror movies. But this rejection is unwarranted and unnecessary if we are using the term in its original, intended meanings.

As I have explained elsewhere in detail, the adjective appears to have been coined by British and French intellectuals and scientists shortly before and around the turn of the twentieth century, first as the British English *supernormal*, then as the French *paranormal*, in order to describe things like telepathic and poltergeist phenomena. As they were carefully crafted and originally intended, the supernormal and the paranormal meant something like "of the natural world but not yet explainable by our present science." They meant "normal," but normal on the extreme end of the spectrum, an end which we do not yet have the tools to model and map but someday will. These adjectives did *not* mean "supernatural," that is, they did not signal the presence of a ghost, deity, or anything necessarily outside the natural world and its workings. Quite the contrary, both the supernormal and the paranormal signaled exactly the approach that Whitley has long advocated.

But I understand how these historical origins are now largely lost. Perhaps, then, it is time to retire a word like "paranormal." Or at least use it

much more carefully. Whatever we decide, it is certainly time to clean up our language and make it more precise again. It is time for the super natural.

On Belief and Denial

There is another level to Whitley Strieber as phenomenon, and it has to do with this notion of taking one's experiences as experiments, this extraordinary modern ability to *not* believe one's own most intimate experiences, however convincing they may appear.

It bears constant underlining. Belief is an understandable but often unhelpful response in this realm. It is also a potentially dangerous response. Certain types of belief—particularly literalist ones that do not understand the symbolic or coded nature of religious expressions—can quickly make a fool out of one, since religious experiences interpreted literally are often patently absurd. To the extent, moreover, that literalist beliefs lead people to identify themselves with their culturally relative religious ideas, local ethnicities, and historical cultures, they can also lead to real social conflict, even horrific violence, as we see again and again in our modern world. Fundamentalism, of whatever stripe, is the curse and cancer of religious belief.

And the exact same warning holds here as well, in the realm of the super natural. As John Keel put it with respect to his own paranormal researches: "Belief is the enemy." To the famous motto of the 1990s hit television series *The X-Files*, "I want to believe," Keel would have shot back immediately: "Don't."

I would not go that far, since I think religious expressions, including religious beliefs, are often pointing toward something very real, perhaps even ultimately real, if always in coded ways. But there is more. I also think that there is something potentially occult or magical about belief. Belief can function as a naive literalism or serious obstacle to serious thought, to be sure. But belief can also conjure. Belief can make real. Belief might even act as a kind of psychic portal through which other beings can enter our world, as Whitley has speculated in some of his most visionary moments. It all comes down to *how* one believes, not whether one believes. It all comes

down to whether one possesses an adequate understanding of the religious imagination and the symbol. More, much more, on all of this later.

It is also worth observing in this context that the ideological debunker is also a fundamentalist, if of a very different stripe. Unlike the literal believer, who affirms but then misreads what has happened, the debunker denies what happened, what was honestly seen, what was sincerely experienced. The debunker makes a liar out of a truth teller and so shuts down the experience-as-experiment before it can begin. Here our empiricism, our experience, and our experiment come to an end.

Making the Cut

So how to move forward? How to find a new path between and beyond the literalizing belief of the believer and the flatland denial of the debunker? A particularly rich vein of resources for such a way forward can be found in a stream of thought and practice called *phenomenology*.

The basic concepts of phenomenology are not too difficult to understand and are, in fact, already at work in Whitley's writing. A "phenomenon," from which the practice gets its name, is simply the Greek word for "appearance." Here it refers to an awareness of something that appears as an object of experience, *whatever* that object of experience might be. Phenomenology is the study of such appearances. German philosopher Edmund Husserl (1859–1938) is normally credited as its founder, even if the method has deeper roots, as we will see in a moment.[14]

The fundamental idea here is to begin any inquiry by taking a set of experiences on their own terms and setting aside, for the time being, the question of their possible external source, cause, or truth value. The method encourages us to "make a cut" between the appearances themselves and what may, or may not, lie behind them. Whitley practices such a phenomenological cut naturally and effortlessly when he writes in the last chapter that "I am reporting a perception, not making a claim, and there is a world of difference between those two approaches." Indeed! That's the phenomenological cut.

Very much related to phenomenology but lying deeper back in the German stream was the foundational thinking of Immanuel Kant (1724–1804). Kant made a famous distinction between phenomena (again, "appearances" in the mind) and noumena (things in themselves allegedly "out there," apart from how they appear to us). Kant taught us that we do not know the world as it really is. We only know the world as it is filtered through and shaped by our senses and the structuring categories of the human mind (very basic unquestioned categories, like space, time, and causality). None of these mental filters or innate categories of understanding are necessarily reflective of what is really "out there," although Kant thought that the appearances were reflections of something real.

In today's language, we would say that the innate categories of space, time, and causality and our perceptions of the physical world are functions of our neurological wiring and senses. Such categories and sensory filters are certainly "close enough," since they have allowed us to adapt and survive in this world for hundreds of thousands of years (and gross misperceptions of the natural world would, obviously, be fatal for any young species or new organism). But we cannot assume from any of this that our perceptions are absolutely true, only that they are relatively and practically true. All we can assume is that our perceptions of the world are *true enough*.

True enough for what?

Survival.

Unfortunately, as science progresses, this "true enough" gets smaller and smaller. We are now being told that 95 percent of the physical world is completely invisible and unknown to our young science. We know nothing about this "dark energy" and "dark matter." We only know that the vast dark is there. And the 5 percent we know something about? Well, we cannot sense the vast majority of it, either. Indeed, our senses are pathetic when it comes to the full range of the electromagnetic spectrum. We are almost totally deaf, dumb, and blind in this Already World of energy and light. Nearly *everything* about the cosmos is occult to our evolved (or unevolved) perceptual system.

This cut, then, between "what appears" and "what is" is not just a function of some difficult ideas from some dead German professors. It is a

very reasonable and appropriate response to *our actual situation in the cosmos*.

The Numinous

The same distinction between experience-as-appearance and the possible object or source of such an experience has been central to the study of religion, where scholars routinely "make the cut," or suspend judgment about the truth value of a religious phenomenon, as a means to study religious experiences they have not had, mythical worlds they do not share, and belief systems that they do not hold. The reason is simple enough. Once one makes such a cut, one can, in principle, take *any* religious experience or mythical world seriously and sympathetically without adopting any particular interpretation of it, much as one suspends disbelief to enjoy a good novel or watch a science-fiction movie.

Particularly influential here has been the work of yet another German professor, Rudolf Otto (1869–1937). In the pages of this book, as in his other books, Whitley often invokes the language of the "numinous" to capture the feel and sensibilities of his experiences. The word was invented by Otto in one of the genuine classics of the study of religion, *The Idea of the Holy* (1917). By "the holy" Otto did not mean "the good" or "the ethical." He meant "the numinous." He meant an awesome power, electric energy, or godlike presence that a human being encounters in the environment and experiences as special, set apart—as Wholly Other. Today we might say: as Alien. What I think Otto was really writing about is the deeper nature of consciousness itself beyond the ego—a form of extended or cosmic mind that when manifested to the human ego, appears as Other or Alien. But we'll get to that later.

Otto went to great lengths, mostly with biblical materials, to show that this numinous energy or alien presence might be experienced as positive or negative, or both at the same time. The numinous might in fact invoke a whole range of physiological, emotional, and spiritual responses: dread and foreboding, awe and mystery, eeriness, terror, reverence and worship, even ecstasy and mystical union. The angel is an expression of the numinous, but so too is the demon.

Otto was very much a follower of Kant. He did not think that human beings generally have any direct access to the numinous presence as it really and truly is. He thought rather that this mystical presence is always filtered through and shaped by the categories of the human mind and the cultures that largely determine its functioning. Otto, in short, had "made the cut," and at about the same time as Husserl.

This may seem like an unnecessary conversation to you. It also may seem like an easy and obvious thing to do. But it is in fact very necessary, and many, if not most, people are not able to make this cut, *especially* when it comes to religious phenomena. Many people firmly believe that what they believe is what is real; that is, they fail to make a cut between what has appeared to them within a particular experience or community and what may, or may not, actually be the case. Moreover, they can only take the religious experiences of their own culture and community sympathetically. And they insist on treating the numinous apparition of, say, an angel in completely different ways than they would treat the numinous apparition of, say, an alien or a demon. *They can't make the cut*.

Just as seriously—and just as seriously wrong—many people immediately dismiss and demean any extraordinary experience that cannot be fit into their own experience of the world. They declare them unreal, hallucinatory, or just plain crazy. In so doing, they also fail to make the cut. Making the cut means taking *all* experiences seriously, however strange or impossible they may seem to a particular psyche, and without immediately jumping to a moral or intellectual conclusion about what they mean or point toward.

Extreme experiences like those of Whitley and the modern contactee are particularly interesting here. We know that they happen. We do not know what they are. But we do not need to know what they are in order to begin to study their patterns, histories, narrative structures, sexual dimensions, and philosophical implications. Perhaps such appearances are more or less what they seem to be. Perhaps they are expressions of something else that is *not* appearing, something that, by its very nature, cannot appear as it really is to an embodied ego with this particular evolved nervous system. To employ a common movie metaphor, perhaps the pictures on the screen of the abduction experience are being projected from

somewhere else, somewhere outside the dark room of the theater, somewhere "behind" or, if you prefer, "above" the display itself.

We will, in fact, explore this very suggestion below. We will also see how the visionary appearances of Whitley displayed very real physical and sonic effects in the external environment, effects that Anne and others could see and hear. Whitley will also challenge us to confront the contact experience as something that cannot be safely walled off in a subjective psyche, as just a set of private experiences. Which is all to say that we will venture into the questions of what may lie beyond the phenomenological cut and well outside the phenomena of the contact experience.

But not yet. Here, at the beginning, it is enough to make the phenomenological cut and focus on the experiences as experiences, that is, purely as a subject (which may turn out to be something *far* bigger than we suppose). This simple move will immediately provide our conversation with a new intellectual and moral generosity. Making such a cut will allow us, after all, to take the most fantastic, unbelievable, even graphically sexual appearances and treat them seriously and sympathetically *without* having to treat them literally and naively. The practice will enable us to be faithful to what actually appeared and is being reported without immediately believing or dismissing it. Making the cut will free us to talk about the impossible without it sounding impossible. It will enable us to entertain the most astonishing possibilities without sounding like fools.

The Human as Two

"Making the cut" asks us to consider a particular duality or twoness in the human being, at least in the functioning of the human psyche and how it knows the world. Here, after all, we are asked to make a clear distinction between what appears to us as sense-based egos ("what we know"), and what actually is out there ("what is"). Kant and his successors have argued that human beings can never know the latter. Like the prisoners of Plato's Cave, we are all locked down tight to the cave floor of our senses and brains. We are locked into the cave of the skull, as it were, and condemned to witness only flat, sense-based shadow shows in the dark—mini-movies inside our head.

But here is the thing. The history of mystical literature strongly suggests something else or more. Indeed, the whole point of Plato's parable is that we *can* crawl out of the cave and see the multidimensional world outside, that we *do* have access to the Light, even if many of our peers will never see it and so continue to deny that it exists at all. In rare but real cases, it very much looks as if individual human beings can know, even become, something of reality as it really is, as opposed to what their cultural, religious, and sensory scripts tell them. In essence, these individuals "wake up" out of the social and sensory movie that they are caught in as characters. They peel themselves as perceptions off the screen, turn around, and come to know something of the projecting light streaming in from behind or above them.

Meister Eckhart (1260–1328), the great medieval mystic, recognized this already over seven hundred years ago in a little sermon that sounds like a chapter out of Edwin Abbot's *Flatland* (1884). Eckhart is preaching of an inner light that makes humans divine and of a power beyond space and time that he called the eternal Now. "This light," he wrote, "is so potent that it is not merely in itself free of time and space, but . . . this light takes away time and space."[15] In our own modern terms, we might say that this light grants a type of consciousness that is outside space-time. To employ the traditional religious terms, it is infinite (beyond space) and immortal (beyond time). "Anyone powerfully seized by this light," the man preached, "would be as far superior to another man as a living man is compared to one painted on a wall."[16] The painted human lives in only two dimensions, we would say today. He is "flat." The illuminated human now lives in three or four or more. He or she is hyperdimensional, we would say.

This, I take it, is what Whitley is getting at through his own movielike visions, which admittedly astonish him and have even tempted him to accept them as literally true, but which he can never quite bring himself to fully believe. From the beginning, he has suspected that something else is going on, that these are complex psychical projections from some hyperdimension and not simple objective truths, hence the very first lines of *Communion*, about how "the enigmatic presence of the human mind winks back from the dark." Whitley has expressed real frustration in the preceding chapter about how so few took to heart that opening line and how so many,

to this day, continue to read him as some kind of literal believer in what he witnessed on his own private movie screen.

When one reads him carefully, what one finds is a very modern version of what one finds when one reads classical mystical literature—what I have called the Human as Two. Here is Whitley on the nature of his appearances or experiences: "I don't mean that it's entirely in the mind, but rather that the mind might not be entirely in us." In short, mind "might persist even outside of the cradle of the brain." In other words, there is ego, there is the human subject, there is "you" and "me." And then there is mind, which may not be restricted in any way to a brain, a skull, an individual ego, a culture, or a religion.

This, it turns out, is a very old idea that can be found in any number of forms, including the medieval European notion of the *anima mundi* or "soul of the world." Here is Whitley's version of the same: "If mind does exist independent of biology, then, given the conservation of energy, it is likely to be rather old, and given its lack of confinement in the body, limited, if at all, in unknown ways. Considering that this universe is at least thirteen billion years old, and that there is increasing evidence that it might not be the only one out there, it is liable, also, to have a good deal of experience." There is an understatement.

Whitley then goes on to ask a series of very astute questions, including the openly paradoxical one: "How would we communicate with it, and in so doing, to what degree would we be talking to ourselves?" Such a soul-of-the-world or cosmic mind, after all, would be us and not us *at the same time*. And it would behave much like the lights dancing on the movie screen: it would take on *any* cultural narrative (or myth), *any* subjective form (or ego), including some really cruel and really stupid ones, but it would remain, despite all of this, pure white light—without a form, without a story, and without a religion. The Human as Two.

Producer or Reducer?

Such a mind beyond brain would also carry real implications for what is clearly *the* central religious question throughout human history: What happens to us when we die?

It all depends, I suppose, on what we mean by "us." Which part of the Human as Two are we talking about here?

It's really quite simple. If mind is a product of brain, then mind goes away when the brain dies. Period. If, however, the human brain is more like a highly evolved receiver, transmission station, or local neural network that limits, reduces, and shapes mind into a cultural and subjective container that we know as the self or ego (which is itself not the producer of mind either), then when brain dies, the self may or may not go away (or it may stick around for a while, and then go away), but mind almost certainly does not go away. Mind as mind, after all, would be completely unaffected by the death of an individual brain, much as the Internet is not the least bit affected when you turn off your laptop or "drown" it in the swimming pool.

It all comes down to this, then: Is the brain the producer or reducer of consciousness?

Materialist-oriented neuroscientists like to point out that when the brain is damaged, the personality often changes dramatically, and that when the brain stops, consciousness disappears. This, of course, is entirely correct. Where they presume too much is when they conclude from these obvious facts that mind *equals* brain, or that brain *produces* mind. This may be the case, of course, but this possibility does not necessarily follow from the facts. It only follows from a particular interpretation of the facts. All that we really know is that when the biological medium of mind, that is, the human brain, has been damaged or destroyed, these events profoundly effect how mind can be experienced by that particular subject. All that we know is that a laptop at the bottom of the swimming pool won't work anymore.

It might be the case that brain equals mind. Or it might be the case that the laptop computer called a brain has been damaged or destroyed and will no longer project a particular personalized desktop and social media system, but that the Internet of Mind is just fine, thank you very much. The facts are the same facts in either interpretation. The materialist scientists presume the materialist interpretation because they presume materialism, not because the facts require that particular interpretation. In essence, they are confusing an interpretation of the results of science with science itself.

But there are thousands (no doubt millions) of other "rogue" facts, conveniently ignored, wished away, or crudely pathologized as "crazy" or

"delusional" by the same materialist interpreters of science, that support the Internet metaphor of mind beyond brain.[17] Among them we might wish to place Whitley's eerie experience of seeing an old school buddy who had joined the CIA among his alien abductors, a friend who he later learned had passed away a few months earlier.

Whitley uses the experience to humorously call into serious question the typical extraterrestrial hypothesis: "What possible connection could there be between alien scientists from another planet and ectoplasmic manifestations of dear aunt Ethel?" But the same kind of experience can just as easily be used to call into question the typical materialist hypothesis. It is easy enough to dismiss a vision of a dead friend who one knows is dead as a subjective hallucination. It is not so easy to dismiss a vision of a dead friend one does not know is dead. The latter suggests, though hardly proves, some kind of survival and postmortem communication.

Still, perhaps it was all just a coincidence. Whitley, after all, did not know the friend was dead in the vision, and he may have simply put the two things together afterward, like this: vision of friend, news of his death, interpretation that the earlier vision of the friend was a vision of the dead. This kind of coincidental reading, though, loses much of its power when we put it in a larger context. Hence the discovery of Anne, who noticed a spate of similar reports among the letters they received in response to *Communion*.

Whitley also recognizes that the broader shapes and themes of his visions are shared by a veritable crowd of corresponding witnesses. By publishing *Communion* and being honest about what he saw and experienced, he had, in effect, accidentally "uncovered a human experience of vast size that was completely hidden." Whitley is a fine comparativist here, particularly when he notes both the similarities of these different reports, but also their real and genuine differences, which number into literally hundreds of types or patterns. In his own words, he wants "to expose the large-scale structures that are present beneath the immediate narrative surface. For such structures most certainly exist." That is *exactly* how comparativists and phenomenologists talk.

But the letter writers are not alone either in their visions of the dead. This kind of apparition, of someone familiar who the visionary did not

know had died, has been known and commented on for almost a century and a half now. They even have a technical name in the parapsychological literature. They are called "Peak in Darien" experiences after a book of the same title published by Frances Power Cobbe (1822–1904) in 1882. Cobbe adapted the expression from a poem by John Keats in which the poet describes the Spaniards climbing a peak in Darien (now Panama), expecting to see a landmass, but instead seeing another ocean, in this case, the Pacific Ocean. The expression thus carries the sense of surprise at seeing something unexpected, vast, and disconcerting. Over four decades later, the knighted English physicist Sir William Barrett (1844–1925) called systematic attention to these cases again in his classic study, *Deathbed Visions: How the Dead Talk to the Dying* (1926), in his opening chapter, "Visions Seen by the Dying of Persons Unknown by Them to Be Dead."[18]

So much for the "anecdotal" nature of these visions of the dead. In actual historical fact, there is nothing anecdotal about these visions at all. They are part of a stable and consistent pattern in the history of visionary experiences around death that has been reported for a century and a half in the modern English-speaking world. And that, of course, is only what we know in the modern West. The real landscape seen from a higher cross-cultural peak is no doubt much more vast and impressive, if only we would take the time and spend the resources to look.

The Secular Soul

The language of "spirit" and the "spiritual" appears quite a bit in Whitley's writing, and usually in very positive ways. The language of "religion" and the "religious" also appears, but usually in much more critical ways. This, of course, places Whitley quite squarely within a rising new demographic of secular people who nevertheless report spiritual experiences or spiritual orientations to the world. They are sometimes called the "spiritual but not religious," a phrase that emerged from, of all things, a set of questionnaires that sociologists were using. People would check the two boxes marked "spiritual" and "not religious." Hence the expression.

I study and write about new religious movements. Not surprisingly, I am often asked what sets apart the modern orientation of "being spiritual" from the traditional orientation of "being religious." At the risk of simplification, I would say that there are three clear markers.

One is the location of religious authority. The traditionally religious place that authority outside the self in a scriptural text or institution. The spiritual but not religious place that authority inside the self. Two other clear markers are the temporal relationship to revelation and the nature of those past revelations. The traditionally religious locate full revelation in the past and understand the religious life to be a faithful remembering and reliving of some singular revelation. The spiritual but not religious might appreciate multiple past revelations, but they do not consider any of them to be absolute. Further revelations are available in the present and fuller revelations will appear in the future.

Crystallized down to their most basic forms, these three basic markers of the religious and the spiritual become:

on religious authority: outside/inside
on the nature of revelation: singular-perfect/multiple-partial
on the temporal locus of full revelation: past/future

Whitley displays all three markers. He does not think of any of this, of course, as "being spiritual." He thinks of it as "being secular," but in a very special, soul-filled way. Obviously, secularism does not preclude spirituality. If anything, it makes such an orientation possible.

Whitley describes the history of religions as "our long struggle to come to terms with it," "it" being this hypothetical mind outside brain. His final lines pertain directly to these secular-spiritual commitments to looking in, to multiple incomplete revelations and, above all, to a more hopeful future:

> *We started the journey on our knees, cowering before the ruthless and intemperate gods of antiquity. We followed our many religions deeper into the forest, until finally that path played out, disappearing into the current dark mutter of ritual, sloganizing,*

and murder. Now we are at a crucial turning point. Either we journey on, this time along the secular path, or we take another fork, embarking on an even darker, more dangerous, and twisted journey.

We do not have an adequate vocabulary, much less a worldview or a set of institutions, to come to terms with such a human future. Maybe we never will. Maybe the super natural is just too much for us. I doubt this is the case, though. I doubt that the super natural is too much for us for one simple reason. I think we are an expression of it. I think we *are* it.

4

The Blue Man Group—the Other One

WHITLEY

Like so many of the aliens believed to have recently arrived, little blue men have been with us for a long time. As is the case with most of the other forms, they were originally identified in folklore—most frequently, in this case, in northern European folklore. Just as the camera in the Pennsylvania woods recorded the presence of a gnome, people in the past were witness to such things. They saw something. These manifestations probably weren't—and aren't—real in the same sense that you and I are real, but they most certainly do occupy some sort of space in reality.

Not only gnomes, but also and even more commonly small dark blue men have been seen. In the past, they were most often found in mines. Now they're known as "blue aliens." They were observed by German, Welsh, Cornish, and English miners. The folklore was most developed in Germany, where they were given the name kobolds. Because of its dark blue color, the metal cobalt, discovered in a German mine in 1735, was named after them. But the word "kobold" ultimately derives from the Greek for "rogue." Most appropriate, judging from my own experience with them.

They were said to carry, at the level of the heart, a small orb, glowing red, and, in point of fact, I've seen that myself: Sometime in the mid-

seventies, I saw such a being come rushing out of my brother's room in the middle of the night in our house in San Antonio. It was about three feet tall, stocky, wearing a dark blue uniform covered with pockets and flaps, and it held a glowing red light at waist level. It brushed past me, went darting downstairs, and was gone.

I looked in on my brother. He was sleeping peacefully, so I attributed it to a waking dream on my part and forgot about it.

There was another dream during that visit, though, which, looking back, seems of great importance. In it, I saw small men in dark blue uniforms lighting lamps in an ominous looking tower, which, a few years later, I came to see as the Tower of Destruction in the Marseilles Tarot, a card of profound and dynamic change, the destruction of past beliefs.

In about 1976, I had one of those concentrated moments of insight that come to one on occasion, in this case concerning the intricate symbolism contained in the tarot. I saw in it a beautifully worked-out structure that could be used to add definition to the journey of life. It had nothing to do with fortune-telling, but I could certainly see that people who had no direct knowledge of it might have come to believe that fortunes could be told by the cards that contained it. It amounted to an elegant pathway through the symbols of the Major Arcana, which reveals the way the cards interact and what each one means in terms of the growth of consciousness. It came to me very suddenly one day, as I was walking out of my office. I had the peculiar impression that somebody had been in the office with me, a man in a blue suit. But nobody was there.

Shortly after the turn of the century, I recorded my discovery in a book called *The Path*. But back in 1976, I found myself reconsidering that earlier dream, which had been powerful enough to remain in my mind, and coming to see that the lighting of the tower heralded something, some change. But what?

It was, I think, the beginning of the destruction of the system of beliefs by which I had always lived, that the dead are dead and gone, that aliens, if they exist, are certainly not here, and that religion is an anachronism founded in the magical thinking of the past and has no basis in any actual, observational evidence. All of the visions and apparitions of the past, in other words, could be summed up quite simply: they either didn't happen or were the result of misapprehensions or mental problems.

Ah, those innocent days! I was in my "conventional interlude," the years between when I stopped having numinous experiences as a child and started having—or noticing them—once again at the age of forty.

It was not long after seeing the apparition in San Antonio that, back in our little apartment on Fifty-fifth Street in New York, I had a more arresting experience with the kobolds.

It came in the form of another powerful dream. It probably happened in 1973 or 1974, but I still recall it vividly.

I was on a plateau in the middle of an enormous desert. The horizons were much too far away, as if the planet was two or three times its normal size—or, I suppose, as if it was not this planet at all. Before me on the plateau was a narrow road, snaking elegantly through an expanse of close-cropped grass. There were tall trees, like cedars of Lebanon, in a grove off to my right. Ahead, the road passed beneath a tall triumphal arch. To my left was a squat oval building perhaps three stories tall, set in the side of a cliff. Beyond it was the immense desert view that I was seeing. The building was dark blue, and its windows had louvered awnings. The sun was bright and powerful, flooding everything with chalk-white light.

Having no idea what I should do, I decided to walk toward the building. As I went under the arch, I was joined by two small men wearing clothes that were busy with flaps, the overalls of workers. The clothes and the men themselves were a dark, iridescent blue, the same color as the building.

They drew me along to a little ravine. In it were some lean-tos made of sticks. They indicated that this was where they lived. I said, "These aren't even huts." One of them replied in a low, breathy voice, "They're all we need."

At that moment, I got the impression of vast stretches of time, and how hard it was to maintain environmental balance, how you must waste nothing if you expect to survive long enough to matter. From that brief instant would later arise my own deep concern with the environment, which would lead to the writing of *Nature's End* and *Superstorm*, and all the environmental reporting on my website, and the work I have done in this field. From that one moment of dream came a whole lifetime of effort.

I asked them about the building. One of them replied that it was a university. Now that we were close to it, I could see that it was a wreck. I

said, “It looks like it’s in ruins.” The reply, through bubbling humor, was, “It’s a million years old and the scholars aren’t very good at maintenance.” Then they asked me if I would like to attend it.

I can remember the shocked delight and eagerness that flashed through me. I could see an arched doorway in the base. I hurried toward it. But as I drew closer, I found myself struggling through a field of sharp boulders. At that point, two very strange beings appeared, as tall as I was, very thin, with great, slanted black eyes that disturbed me very much as they bored into me.

One of them said, “He’s not ready.” This seemed to disappoint the blue fellows. It certainly disappointed me, and I tried to get around them, but they blocked my way. I sensed that the whole history and meaning of humanity must be known in that place, and that if I could matriculate there, I could learn the truth of us and the secrets of our lives, and find some real definition to the three great questions of what we are, where we are, and why we are here.

I wanted to go in, and badly, but I understood that I had to obey them. The little blue men reacted with regret. They still thought I was ready. Finally, I turned away. The next moment, I woke up. I was covered with sweat, cold, my limbs aching as if I’d been running half the night. Anne lay beside me sleeping peacefully. It was about three.

I sweated out the most intense curiosity and regret that I had ever known. The regret was an agony, and the curiosity maddened me. Little did I know that, in that moment of living dream, I had entered the school. They rejected me, perhaps, in order to find the real depths of my desire. If so, then my regret told them that I was ready.

I was nowhere near that place, though, not anymore. I was back in our tiny apartment, with the night murmur of Manhattan slipping in through the windows.

I went into the living room and got a drink of water in our railroad kitchen. Then I sat at the dining table and cried in silence.

The next encounter with the blue men took place across Eighth Avenue from our apartment, at a strange little storefront that Anne and I had come to call “the whore store.” The reason we called it this was because a young girl would sit in the window in the evenings looking ashamed. She’d be in a hard-backed chair with a dark red curtain behind it. Sometimes, the chair

would be empty, and we would make jokes about what might be going on behind the curtain.

On this night, we were returning from Doubleday's bookshop on Fifth Avenue when we noticed something odd taking place in the whore store. The chair was knocked over and the curtain was flapping furiously. As we watched, astonished, little blue dwarfs kept running out, then darting behind the curtain again. Every so often, the leg or arm or shoulder of a man in a suit would appear, only to be pulled back by the blue men.

We stood there watching this odd display for a moment, then began to feel uneasy. We walked on across Eighth Avenue and went home. From then until we moved, we both avoided passing the whore store.

We discussed the event many times, but never came to any resolution about what we had seen. It was many years before I related it to my dreams, or the apparition I had glimpsed in my parents' house in San Antonio—in fact, not until long after I had begun encountering the kobolds again, in that epochal autumn of 1985.

The first encounter took place in September of that year, probably one of the later weekends in the month. From about my thirteenth year, I had been troubled with neck pain. I'd been to a number of doctors for it. The last one I tried did an X-ray and observed that two of the vertebra were surgically fused. I told him that I'd never had surgery. He said that the fusion was definitely surgical. I repeated that there had been no surgery. So he refused to treat me, and that was the end of that. (Other doctors have since said that it could also be due to a fall on my head as a baby.) The pain dogged me so much that I had taken to pulling at my neck and making the bones crack, gaining a few minutes of relief that way.

On this night, I woke up and saw standing in a far corner of the room, barely visible, what I took to be a squat blue figure about three feet tall. I stared at it, trying to tell if it was a trick of light or if there was indeed something there.

I was distracted by the pain, though, which was intense. Forgetting about the figure, I grabbed at my head and twisted it. The result was like some sort of genius chiropractic adjustment. The vertebrae on the left side popped one after the other all the way down to the center of my back. At one point, there was a deep scraping sound and I felt as if my consciousness had become momentarily detached from my body.

Then it was over. I lay there, confused and a little afraid. Had I broken my neck? What had just happened to me? Then I realized that I was no longer in pain. I sat up. I forgot all about the blue figure. The lack of pain was extraordinary, the sudden freedom of being without it after all these years. From then on, the pain has remained far less than it was before.

It was after that night, with the vision of the kobold still perhaps somewhere in the back of my mind, that I became increasingly apprehensive, and began the gradual journey of fear that would explode into consciousness on the morning of December 27, 1985.

Over the years, my recollections of that night have become complicated by the fact that they returned only gradually, and I am not really sure that I can accurately differentiate between precisely what I recalled in the days immediately afterward, and what came into focus later on. In part, it's because it was structurally so unlike normal experience, and so much of the imagery was so novel.

What I am going to do here is to draw from it my specific recollections of the kobolds. I cannot say with accuracy exactly at what point these memories entered my mind, but they have the same quality as my other memories of these experiences, too self-organizing and vivid to be ordinary dreams, but less defined than what we normally regard as memories of the real.

The specific recollection I am referring to is of being carried—or rather, manhandled—toward a window by a group of kobolds. The experience had enough of the affect of a dream that I wasn't startled into consciousness by it, but rather tried to shrug it off and go back to sleep.

Was I being physically carried out of the house? Later, I had physical injuries. And yet, nothing else about any part of the experience—or most of my experiences—was as firmly invested in physical reality as, say, the act of pushing my pen across this page. (Yes, I still write the old-fashioned way, though I have retired my quills.)

At this point, once the *Communion* experience is behind me, things change. There is a change of scope. It happens subtly, slowly, but nevertheless everything changes.

While I was writing *Communion*, I began questioning people in the immediate area regarding odd things they may have seen. As yet, I was not aware of all the strange sightings across the Hudson in Duchess County,

which would become famous as the Hudson Valley UFO sightings. There were many stories, but one told by a carpenter in the process of finishing a house on our private road is particularly relevant to this part of my narrative.

This was the first of two incidents that, to me, added up to a sort of communication. I have learned, over the years, to see the actions of our visitors as a sort of illustrative language, communication built out of images and events. For example, a consistent image that witnesses connect with them is that of the owl. It has played an enormous role in my own experience of them, in fact. If you study the habits and capabilities of the owl carefully, you find yourself studying the capabilities of the visitors. They are creatures of the night, they are stealthy, silent, and use surprise. Like owls, which can use their extraordinary ears to hear prey scrambling under snow, they have extraordinary means of detection. Like owls, they are predators. Left unanswered, though, is the question of what they are hunting. If we are generally returned home more or less intact, what do they want?

Actually, one level of this book is an exploration of that question.

The incident involving the carpenter occurred during the fall of 1986. He had been hurrying to complete construction before winter arrived, and had ended up in a situation where he had no way to take his tools out at nightfall. He didn't want to leave them in the unlocked house, so he decided to sleep there, on the floor.

Later, he found himself awake and looking straight at a short man who was standing a few feet away. It was too dark to determine any color, but he was short and squat. The carpenter experienced a wave of intense fear, whereupon the man changed before his eyes into a bird of paradise and then disappeared.

Thus ended the first incident, or the first sentence in the paragraph that I saw the visitors as composing.

The second incident was more complex. A couple of years later we had a large group at our cabin who'd had a multi-witness encounter with one of the gray figures with large eyes. I will describe this in a later chapter. A filmmaker was there trying to make a documentary, and he had an encounter with what I think was one of the kobolds. There was a low-light video camera running—one of many attempts we made to document some

of the strange events taking place in that cabin. It failed, but not because nothing happened on that night. It failed because what happened could not be detected by a camera. Could it be that alien technology prevented this? Of course that's possible, but it is also possible that what was happening couldn't be filmed because it was unfolding in a space that cameras cannot record, an inner space that relates to the physical but is not part of it. In other words, a super natural space.

The filmmaker and his wife were sleeping on a convertible couch in the living room when he turned over and saw a small man standing beside the couch staring down at him. He experienced a surge of fear. Instantly, the face of the man changed. It became the menacing head of a hawk, the very image of the Egyptian god Horus, sun-god and protector.

The next thing he knew, the apparition was gone.

He was, naturally, upset, and woke his wife up to discuss what had happened. They could come to no resolution and were still awake at dawn when my son and I came up from the woods where we'd been sleeping, given that every bed in the house was taken.

As we approached the cabin, we observed a short, hooded figure of a translucent gray color come out the front door, race down the deck before our eyes, then dart off into the woods at breakneck speed, dashing with incredible dexterity around the trees.

So, even if what was happening was unfolding in some not quite physical way, it was, in the end, physical enough to be visible, and to need to avoid the trees.

Later, I walked into the woods along that same line. In a few minutes, I found myself at an old Native American burial site where there are two graves. When I bought the land the site is on, I put a codicil in the deed that the burial sites must not be disturbed. I did this in part because two men claiming to be Delaware Indians came to the cabin and said the graves were sacred to them, but also because I had sensed on the day we saw the translucent figure that it was somehow connected to the dead, and maybe to those specific dead.

My son and I went in to find the filmmaker and his wife on their feet, because, just as we had seen the figure leaving, they had experienced a blast of heat so intense they thought the couch had caught fire.

If you want to be invisible, you need to bend light, which takes a lot of energy. Could it be that the figure was using technology to do this, and that, as he left, he reduced the power of some sort of device, which caused both the release of heat and him to become somewhat visible?

With his departure, this part of a very complex incident ended. Earlier that night, two of the other people in the cabin had had face-to-face contact with what, according to their descriptions, was one of the small gray beings. I will discuss this in a later chapter.

It is possible to see these two incidents, and much more, as a form of communication—visual communication as it were, living hieroglyphs. The first one might be seen as inner beauty, represented by the bird of paradise, replacing the outer ugliness of the froglike creature, and adding an implication of flight. The second, the image of Horus, might be seen as a response to the filmmaker's fear. This is because one aspect of this very ancient Egyptian deity is protective. But, like the bird of paradise, the falcon also flies, indicating that it can reach a higher level. So the kobolds, perhaps, were communicating that it is possible to mine for wisdom by ascending.

The Emerald Tablet of Hermes by Hermes Trismegistus, which first appears in an Arabic text in about the eighth century and was considered by master alchemist Sir Isaac Newton to be the foundation of the alchemical movement, is about finding the point of balance between lower and higher worlds, and this, it would seem, might also have been the message being communicated, in pictures and actions, by the kobolds who were involved at our cabin—that is to say, by the unknown aspect of mind that may be their origin.

Another incident that might be related took place at about this time. We were on a co-operative road, and one of the other residents came over to discuss some repairs. During this period, we were hearing high-pitched sounds from under the cabin—drilling, it sounded like, in the seam of iron that runs there. (We were not far from the original Iron Mountain facility in Rosendale, New York.)

Was this drilling an extension of the Iron Mountain storage area? Not likely, given that, as the sound continued, a stream of blood came shooting out of the center of our guest's forehead. Anne immediately staunched it with some tissue. He went home, never to return.

As the Newton translation of the Emerald Tablet says,

The father of all perfection in the whole world is here.
Its force or power is entire if it be converted into earth.

An alchemical transformation that was apparently not so good for the circulatory system of an elderly lawyer caught in its shrilly whine.

After the multiple witness incident and before the incident with the neighbor, at an earlier attempt to assemble a group who would co-operatively have an experience of our "visitors," the first of the truly complex events took place.

Anne and I were upstairs in our bedroom. In the living room below there were four people on cots and the convertible couch, including a magazine editor who had promised to publish his experience if anything happened. In the basement was another couple, sleeping privately.

Sometime after midnight the people in the living room discovered that they couldn't move. But they could still talk, and began to converse as they tried to get off their beds.

A moment later, a group of short, dark blue figures entered the room through the front door, and began leaping around like acrobats, jumping and tumbling and making a ruckus. This went on for a few minutes until they disappeared and the group found that they could once again move.

They spent the rest of the night talking about what had happened. Meanwhile, an odd event took place in the basement, one that would turn out to be astonishingly and unexpectedly common. Among other things, it would profoundly weaken the argument that any alien presence that may be here is on a scientific expedition.

What happened was that the couple sleeping in the basement woke up to see an old friend of theirs standing at the foot of the bed. She spoke to them, telling them that she was all right. They were astounded, because she had died in the Mexico City earthquake of 1983, and yet here she was, big as life and seemingly entirely solid, standing before them telling them that she, who had been dead now for four years, was perfectly fine.

Upstairs, little blue aliens were cavorting in the living room. Downstairs, a ghost, seemingly solid and very much alive, was telling two

of her old friends that she was fine.

So, what was this all about? What happened?

What happened was that beings popularly believed (by those who do believe) to be aliens, came into the living room and put themselves on display by leaping around before a temporarily paralyzed audience. Meanwhile in the basement, a very solid-seeming ghost showed up. As would almost universally be the case in the other such instances that followed at our cabin, and the many others that have been reported to us, she assured them that she was fine, and then disappeared.

That's what appeared to happen, anyway. But what *really* happened? What can it mean?

As Anne and I worked together on this, as we did on everything, she asked the question: How do we know that any of this—the visits from Horus and the bird of paradise, and, for that matter, the meanings we are deriving not only from things like that but also from the whole "school" of close encounter—is communication? Perhaps it's simply a matter of our using our own knowledge to construct meanings that were in no way intended—at least, not by the entities we saw.

Maybe they don't know any more than we do. Given their chimerical nature, maybe even less. There can be little question but that there is a structure, large in scale and intellectually dynamic, that gives form to the whole phenomenon, including UFO sightings, alien encounters, encounters with the dead—all of it. Does it come from them, from us, or from some larger manifestation of consciousness that is dancing us marionettes to a cosmic tune?

Whatever its origin, judging from the history of religion, it is probably a good deal more dangerous than it looks. Religions have a habit of launching themselves among rejected minorities, then emerging unexpectedly from the cultural shadows, believers with their swords aflame. We human beings have a great defect, which is that we are all too often willing to both spread and enforce our ideas with violence.

If aliens show up, all sorts of people will rush forward with supposedly authoritative explanations of what is going on. Few of these are likely to include the presence of the dead in the equation, and none will include any explanation for the group of stories I will now tell.

But first, as these are way, way out there in terms of strangeness, a disclaimer: I would never have believed them, not for a moment, had there not been witnesses. As has so often been true in my experiential life, these experiences, outré as they were, were shared with others.

I might refer here to Jeff's concept of the Human as Two, and mention that these may be glimpses, as it were, through the fence that surrounds Charles Fort's famous comment in *Book of the Damned*, "I think we're property." We are little, curious animals, as it were, peering through the slats of the fence that surrounds our barnyard, and seeing beyond the edge not another world, but a more real vision of ourselves reflected as noumena and wondering, "What is *that*?"

It is what we are, would be one possible answer.

The first of these experiences took place in our apartment in Manhattan. I was lying in bed one afternoon, not asleep, when suddenly I felt a strange pulsation cross my chest. I opened my eyes to see an image before me, the head and shoulders of a being. It had round, coal-black eyes, very gentle, in a familiar "gray alien" face. The image was cut off along a line that precisely paralleled the pulsation in my chest. The gentleness of the being was striking. Equally striking was the feeling I had that I was looking at another form of myself or at somebody who inhabits me.

At about this same time, I woke up one morning with the sensation that my head was open at the top and there was somebody inside me. As I came into consciousness, a youthful voice, shrill with fear, cried out, "I'm being trapped inside a body."

That brought me to full and immediate consciousness, you can be sure. But it never went further. Not another stirring. I was left to wonder what had given rise to this dream or hallucination or whatever it was. I am still wondering.

The famed psychic Ingo Swann came to the house at about that time. During our conversation, he suddenly kicked his feet uneasily and said that he was being invaded by somebody. Within a couple of minutes, he got up and rushed out, never to return.

The next incident took place about a year later, when we were living in Brooklyn Heights. I was curled up on a loveseat reading. Anne was sitting in a chair beside me doing the same. Waves of vibration began flowing through me, surging up and down my body. I thought to myself that Anne

was finally going to get a chance to see an alien, because I was about to change form. Just then, though, one of our cats jumped up on my chest. He yowled as electric sparks shot between his paws and my body, and immediately jumped down. Nothing further happened, so I assumed that the balance had been thrown off. I spent the rest of the afternoon wondering what aliens really are . . . and what we are.

Later that night, I woke up. I was in the other form. I got out of bed and found that I could fly a few inches above the floor. I was entirely conscious. I felt normal, but far lighter than usual. Unfortunately, I did not look back at the bed. I wish I had, because then I would have seen if my normal body was still there.

Instead, I went upstairs to my son's room. He had a friend sleeping over, and the boy woke up. At this point, I was against the ceiling, hovering above them. The boy seemed delighted. He was smiling from ear to ear.

I then went back down to the master bedroom, but on the way met another "alien," who begged me never to leave her again, never to return to the other form. She screamed, threw herself onto my back, and pleaded with me. I can remember her arms around me, as strong as steel.

The next thing I knew, though, I was lying back in bed. I was awake. Beside me Anne lay with her eyes open, seemingly both asleep and awake at the same time. Nothing further happened, but I spent the rest of that night awake, turning over in my mind all the possibilities that the experience suggested. After a few minutes, Anne's sleep returned to normal. I finally decided that I'd had some sort of hallucinatory dream that has not yet been identified and fell asleep myself.

When I went down to breakfast, the boys were having a sullen conversation. They would not speak to me. Later our son said that his friend had seen one of those *things* in the bedroom and was furious about it. If he was going to have any sort of social life, let alone more sleepovers, no more aliens, *please*! And here I was again, face-to-face with another witness to the impossible. On one level of the boy's mind, smiles of delighted recognition. On another, terrible fear and anger.

Which one is more true? Or better put perhaps, who are we, that we so conceal ourselves from ourselves?

I am far from alone in having experiences like this, that suggest the presence of an entirely unexpected duality of human being, not to say an

entirely different core to reality itself—indeed, Jeff's "human as two."

I knew a massage therapist who specialized in working with very frail people. One time while massaging a patient (an elderly woman with an extremely weak heart), he felt an odd vibration, looked up from the patient, and saw in a mirror across the room that he had apparently turned into an alien. Naturally, he was terrified that she'd see this, too, and that the shock would kill her. He continued quietly massaging her while in this state for some little time, until he finally resumed his normal appearance with her fortunately none the wiser.

Judging from the aforementioned Podesta tweet, it seems likely that the government could be holding back some pretty surprising information; perhaps even more so than Podesta himself imagined. He also wrote the introduction to UFO investigator Leslie Kean's book *UFOs: Generals, Pilots and Government Officials Go on the Record*. The book makes a convincing case that officials are aware of something unknown in our skies. But I am not so sure that the conclusions that the objects are spacecraft and that they are piloted by aliens—which are universally believed in the UFO community and, for all I know, in government circles as well—are correct. In fact, even if alleged aliens actually come forward in some way and claim that this is true, I think we should still hesitate to abandon the questions that surround the enigma before the whole of the truth is understood.

It is interesting to contemplate that this level of mind that we are discussing must be held responsible not just for the ancient, organic polytheisms but also for many of the more modern religions.

One must ask, if it is there, are its ambitions malignant or confused, or is it our response that is defective? Something is most certainly very wrong, or we wouldn't have spent the last three thousand years and more killing each other over religion. We convert the ambiguities of meaning that it presents us into beliefs, which we simply cannot handle. Inevitably, in defense of belief, we become willing to die and willing to kill.

If beliefs—even scientific beliefs—could really be brought into clear focus, then the basic philosophical question, "Why is there something rather than nothing?" would have a clear and unambiguous answer.

As established religions in the West implode and Islam suffers its agonies, a vast and hidden experience spreads among the people, its power concealed behind the same sort of wall of denial that Rome once erected

against Christianity, which was also derided, ignored, and persecuted, as most religions are during their early emergent periods.

By the end of the first century CE, Christianity probably had only a few thousand devotees. Presently, millions of people have been touched by UFO lore.

Within a few months of the publication of *Communion*, Anne was reading our mountains of letters as fast as she could, and making notes of similarities as she went along. It was during this period that we understood the actual complexity of what we were dealing with, and just how deeply it was penetrating human consciousness. I can recall going into her office and seeing on the wall a yellow sheet with a list of typical observations in one column and numbers in another. I noticed that she had written at the top of the sheet, "This has something to do with what we call death."

I recalled that this had happened to me. As I mentioned earlier, on the night of December 26, I had seen a friend with the aliens. He had recently retired from the CIA. During the period that I thought I had been the victim of a conventional crime, I had attempted to find him, only to discover that he had died the previous March. So I was among those who had seen a dead man with the aliens. There was nothing ghostly about him at all. Like the apparition our friends saw at the foot of their bed, he had seemed entirely solid and real.

During this period, also, a few months after *Communion* was published, I received a call from my literary agency. A reader was desperate to get in touch with me. At the time, there were thousands of people doing this, but only this one had located my agency and called them. In those days, before the Internet, this took some significant effort, so I called him.

He told the following heartrending story: He and his wife had been sitting in their living room. Their old dog had become unexpectedly agitated and had needed to go out a second time. As the wife was opening the front door, she saw what appeared to be a fireball roar overhead and disappear below the treetops. She told her husband that she'd just seen a plane on fire and crashing. The next moment, their seven-year-old son came rushing down from his bedroom shouting, "Little blue men came into my room and they had Frankie [his older brother] with them and he said to tell you he was OK."

The older boy had been killed in an auto accident the week before, and the father desperately wanted to know if there was any reason to believe his child's story.

I was able to tell him that this was actually a commonplace part of the experience, judging from what we were discovering.

Not every experience of the kobolds involves death and the dead.

By late 1987, we were literally inundated with letters. Anne was determined to read them all and catalog as many as possible. She was looking for a secretary to help her when she found herself reading a remarkable narrative from a woman who lived across the street from us in Greenwich Village.

Her name is Lorie Barnes, and she became our secretary and now has been a friend for over thirty years. She is also among the people who have had encounters at our cabin, and has gone on record with them.

When she was a young woman and pregnant back in the 1950s, she was lying in bed one night reading and waiting for her husband to return from work, when movement at the foot of the bed startled her.

She was shocked to see a group of squat blue or black figures with hideous froglike faces. As she recoiled, the one in the lead said, "Do not be afraid. We are not here for you. We are interested in the girl child you are carrying."

Of course, this took her to a new level of panic, but before she could completely lose her mind, they ended the confrontation with a brief and deeply startling statement that we will address in a moment. They withdrew, and disappeared from the room. When born, Lorie's child was indeed a girl. Back in those days, there was no way to determine the sex of a fetus. At least, we didn't have one.

In another instance, this one involving death, I saw, in my mind's eye, an event that haunts me still. A friend was having open heart surgery. He was alone in the world, an ill-liked man and something of a criminal. Anne and I did not want him to wake up in an empty room after his ordeal, so we were at the hospital keeping vigil. Our plan was that he would see friendly faces when he was taken out of recovery.

Perhaps two hours into the procedure, I was surprised to see him standing in the doorway of the waiting room. He stared at me with a mixture of longing and resignation, his eyes at once famished and deeply

sad. To a degree, he had led a dissolute and dishonest life, but he had also been a loyal family man. He had been my friend since boyhood.

In the next instant, he was gone.

I said to Anne, "I saw Tommy. Tommy just died."

In another instant, my mind's eye was filled with a vision of a totally unexpected kind. In it, a group of kobolds were carrying him through a tumbledown cardboard slum in India. Then he was gone and in his place there was a tiny baby girl being held by her father.

The baby's eyes widened with what seemed to me to be adult recognition, and the infant began screaming terribly, waving its arms and kicking, its eyes practically popping out of its head. The frantic parents tried to comfort it, and then the vision was gone.

The doctor came in and told us that our friend was dead.

I've had long thoughts about that vision. What might it mean—that these odd beings are indeed the managers of our souls? Did they put the soul of a bad man into a fresh young body, to give this not entirely lost being some sort of a second chance? Is that in some way part of life? What is life? What does it actually mean to be human?

Who are we, why are we here, where are we?

The activities of the kobolds are not confined to the regions of birth and death. I know an individual who, as a child, said that he would sometimes wake up at night and find them shining lights on his body. They said that they were doctors, and they were examining his soul.

Another incident took place on the Grand Central Parkway in Queens; it was so spectacular and mysterious that all I can really do is relate it, then let the questions it raises sing their haunting song.

As a gentleman I knew in those days was driving on the parkway in heavy late-afternoon traffic, he was horrified to see a jet coming straight toward his car, apparently about to crash into the dense traffic. Instead, though, it went right overhead, and he was perplexed to observe that the engines appeared to be wood cutouts. The whole plane was fake. Huge, but nothing more than a stage prop, in some bizarre way set to flight.

It may have been there to deflect attention away from what was happening nearby, because as he lowered his gaze to reengage with the traffic, he saw what appeared to be an enormous animated billboard on the roadside. It was lighted like the news feeds in Times Square, and strange

symbols were flashing across it. I asked him what they looked like, but he wasn't able to remember them, except that they were moving fast and didn't look at all familiar.

He noticed cars along the roadside and people getting out and walking into the dark beneath the shoulder. It was all so odd, he decided to stop himself, take a look, and ask some of the others what they thought.

When he got out of his car, he could see a short distance away a number of people standing in a circle. As he walked toward them, he was approached by fearsome looking little men in dark blue uniforms, one of whom snarled at him, "Get out of here."

He did. But what had he witnessed? The fake plane seems to have been there to draw the attention of passersby away from what was happening. But what in the world *was* happening? I cannot say if it had anything to do with aliens, but it certainly did have to do with human beings, because there were people there in that circle.

What of the little men, though? Who were they?

Actually, there is something of an answer. As Lorie Barnes lay in her bed, young and pregnant and terrified beyond words, the leading figure asked, "Why are you so afraid?" She replied, "Because you're *so ugly*!"

He laid a thickly gloved hand on her wrist and said in a kind and understanding voice, "My dear, one day you will look just like us."

But what might this mean? Are we to turn into aliens, then? Or, if we take this comment at face value, might it not mean that there is more than one human form?

There appeared among our letters in 1988 a remarkably vivid account from a woman in Australia, who had been doing housework in the middle of the day when some very strange creatures had abruptly appeared in her sitting room. She observed a willowy being with dark, slanted eyes and a group of short, stocky ones in "brown shrouds," who seemed to her to be workers, while the tall one was more of a supervisor.

It proceeded to overpower her with its mind while the workers moved about in the background, doing what she could not imagine. After a ferocious mental struggle, during which she literally tried to crawl out of the house as she could no longer walk, all went dark. When she woke up, it was hours later. She never found out what had happened to her during that missing time.

Presumably, though, the creatures who put her through this ordeal know—and perhaps, also, that is something close to the secret of the ages.

In any case, one wonders, looking at Lorie Barnes's story and the story of the Australian woman, if we are not seeing the outline of a very remarkable and unsuspected structure: we are the kobolds. They are us working, somehow, in the fields of the soul. And one day, many of the living will join them down this very strange path, as we enter this other level of humanity, where what is hidden to us in this state, is the grammar of their ordinary truth.

5

A Context in the Sky

JEFF

We have only faith to guide us, say the theologians.

Which faith?

It is my acceptance that what we call evidence, and whatever we think we mean by intuition and faith are the phenomena of eras, and that the best of minds, or minds best in rapport with the dominant motif of an era, have intuition and faith and belief that depend upon what is called evidence, relatively to pagan gods, then to the god of the christians, and then to godlessness—and then to whatever is coming next.

. . . . If now, affairs upon this earth be fluttering upon the edge of a new era, and I give expression to coming thoughts of that era, thousands of other minds are changing, and all of us will take on new thoughts concordantly, and see, as important evidence, piffle of the past.

Charles Fort, *Lo!*

History is not what we think it is. Certainly its meanings change as we engage it differently. Piffle of the past—odd things in the historical record that make no sense to us because of our convictions about how the world works. Until, of course, those convictions pass and the piffle of the past appear as the unrecognized codes of some future knowledge.

Back to the piffle. I think most readers are probably like me when they encounter the story about the blue trolls bouncing around the Striebers' cabin living room as their paralyzed guests watch the show. I have never

seen any squat blue aliens. I think most readers are like me again when they hear about the couple who witnessed an old (dead) friend show up in perfectly good form—a "solid ghost . . . entirely solid and real." I have never seen a ghost, much less a resurrected woman. For that matter, I think most readers are like me again when they hear almost *any* UFO story. I have never seen a UFO of any kind.[19] When it comes to these sorts of things, I am a veritable genius of nonexperience. I am an amazing spiritual dud.

So why do I believe Whitley? Why listen to this professional storyteller tell us more stories? I have numerous professional reasons and one deeply personal reason to listen. I will get to the personal reason in chapter 9 (turns out that this dingbat is not a total dud). For now, let me focus on the professional ones. These are not simply professional reasons. They are also methods or practices, that is, they are highly developed "tools" with which to make some sense of otherwise impossible things. If you know where to find these tools (in the professional study of religion) and take the trouble to learn how to use them well, you can build the most astonishing things. Like a new world.

So far, I have introduced two such practices. It seems helpful to begin a list, as there will be quite a few others. Indeed, before we are done here, you will have an entire "practice kit" or "toolbox" at your disposal, which I will summarize at the end of the book in an appendix.[20]

We encountered the first practice in chapter 1. This is the first and most important of all the practices in the study of religion. We call it simply *comparison*. This is a deceptive word, mostly because it is so familiar and seems so common. Consequently, we always underestimate the power of what this mental technology can do. We also underestimate the sheer havoc and embarrassing mistakes this tool can create, if it is not handled expertly and used well. As we shall repeatedly see, *everything* depends on what you "put on the table," that is, everything depends on your comparative practice: what you compare with what to conclude what.

In our opening pages, I explained that if we collect enough seemingly "anecdotal" or "anomalous" experiences from different times and places and place them together on a flat and fair comparative table, we can quickly see that these reports are neither anecdotal nor anomalous. We can see that

they are actually common occurrences in the species. They are part of our world. They are "natural," as we say, even if each of them is also rare with respect to any particular individual, and all of them are "super," that is, beyond how we presently understand how this natural world works. But—and, again, here is the big point—we can only begin to perceive and understand these super natural things through a careful comparative practice. Otherwise, they are more or less invisible. Otherwise, they seem coincidental, accidental, meaningless. Or they seem to mean what they, as a whole now, almost certainly do not mean: that there are spacemen out for sex, or UFOs are demons.

We encountered the second tool or practice in chapter 3: *phenomenology*. We learned to "make the cut" between "what appears" on our comparative table and "what actually is." We also learned that our sensory systems are simply not set up to know the latter. This cut allows us to take seriously even the most fantastic appearances of human experience without naively equating them or their interpretations with the truth of things (and the truth of things may well be weirder still). We can put the damnedest things on our comparative table.

There is a third tool or practice. I want to take it up now. It is a very simple and effective way to make the impossible possible. As with comparison and phenomenology, historians and humanists have given this third practice a technical name. They call it *historical contextualization*, or, more simply, *history*. This is what I want to do in the present chapter. I want to historically contextualize Whitley's abduction experience. I want to place it in a larger history.

These three practices, I should immediately observe, are often performed together. Whitley performs comparison and contextualization at different points in his narrative, for example: when he locates his troll experiences in the larger European history of blue troll folklore; or when he tells us of the child who saw the little blue men and whose dead brother, Frankie, was with them; or when their neighbor-secretary Lorie Barnes tells Whitley about the squat black figures who took such an interest in her unborn daughter; or when he talks to his neighbors and looks for other stories of things seen in the sky in that area at that time.

Anne took up the comparative method again when she read through the *Communion* letters, created a chart and classification scheme on the

wall, recognized patterns in the data, and came to the working hypothesis: "This has something to do with what we call death." Actually, Anne had moved beyond collection, classification, and comparison, beyond the phenomenological cut, and beyond historical contextualization with such a sentence. She had moved into the act of theorizing her comparative data.

For now, let us take up this third tool or practice of historical contextualization. I want to bring it out into the open and make it more explicit and conscious. I also want to show how contextualization can have a most ironic and unintended result, ironic and unintended anyway for the conventional historian.[21] As we will now see, robust historical contextualization, like robust comparison across historical contexts, does not always end up explaining everything. Sometimes it ends up making our world much weirder than we thought.

Hudson Valley, 1909–1986

Historians, and humanists in general (by which I simply mean professionals who work in the humanities), are expert in insisting on the "historical context" of every human experience, idea, value, or expression. What they mean by this is that every human experience takes place in a very particular historical context and so is profoundly shaped by that place and time. Think about who you are. You are who you are largely because of where and when you were born, who your parents were and how they raised you, what language or languages you speak, and so on. Change any of these variables and you would be a different self, a different person.

But many humanists often want to push this obvious truth further. They want to replace my carefully chosen "shaped by that place and time" with another expression: "constructed by that place and time," by which they really mean: "completely determined by that place and time." For them, everything about human experience and expression is not just shaped or mediated by a historical context. It is constructed out of that historical situation and, or so it is implied, is *nothing but* that historical situation. Everything human can finally be reduced to and explained by "history," which is to say: by its historical context.

This move, of course, makes every human experience relative to a particular place in time. Taken to its logical end, it turns us all into psychological silos, silos that have no real way of communicating across space and time (hence, logically speaking, "history" should not be possible). It also sucks any bigger meaning out of the world. No single experience now can be taken as a sign or expression of some larger cross-cultural reality or shared human nature, much less as a revelation of some cosmic truth. It's all history. It's all context. It's all constructed. Put in the terms of our earlier analogy, it's all appearance. There is no projector behind or above us. There is no real behind the show.

The ideological debunkers of anomalous phenomena have a very similar strategy in mind when they label the extraordinary data of this realm anecdotal. Basically, what they are arguing is the same point, but now in reverse. They are arguing that these experiences have no larger context or bigger point to make (this is what "anecdotal" means). They are arguing that these pure anomalies can be fully explained (away) as local constructions of a single human psyche and so should not concern us as either meaningful or real in the sense that other things are real, that is, in the sense that they can be experienced by multiple individuals in more or less the same way in other times and climes. In their opinion, such anomalous experiences can tell us nothing about the real world or our real nature because they sit entirely alone among our other more public and so more reliable perceptions and experiences. "No broader context" equals "unreal." These anomalies are best left ignored, then, as meaningless blips, as statistical flukes, or as neurological hiccups.

There is a real insight here. The meaning of something, after all, *does* depend on its context, be that a text, a grammar, or a social event. To take a simple, mundane example, I know that a long flowing piece of cloth attached around a person's shoulders and neck is interpreted differently in a superhero comic book than it is at an elite social event. The meaning of the "cape" is determined by its literary, artistic, and social contexts. This is why *completely* anomalous experiences would in fact be "meaningless" in the simple sense that we would have nothing else to compare them to, no context in which to place them, and so no way of understanding what they are or how they are functioning.

But here is the funny thing. Such historical and contextual insights are helpful enough, but, if applied fairly and systematically, they can easily backfire on the conventional historian and the dogmatic debunker. Sometimes, after all, what initially looks anomalous or "without a context" turns out, on closer historical inspection (that is, with better history), to be neither. A truly robust historical perspective here does not relativize or dismiss. Sometimes it ends up confirming the anomalous experience as part of a much larger pattern or context. In this way, good history, like good comparison and good phenomenology, makes the impossible possible.

Consider, for example, the historical contexts of the events recounted in *Communion* and in Whitley's later nonfiction books on this same series of events. These events may seem to the uninformed reader to be completely anomalous, just plain weird, but they are in historical fact anything but. If we look carefully at either the big picture or the little picture, a very different image on our comparative screen emerges, as if tens of thousands of little tiny pixels were flashing in and out on our flat-screen TV to take a definite, and quite eerie, shape and story.

First, step back a bit from the television. Way back. The visitors, of course, are not anomalous at all. They possess *countless* precedents in the general history of religions. And that is an understatement. I do not think it is too much of a simplification to suggest that the entire history of religions can be summed up this way: strange superbeings from the sky come down to interact with human beings, provide them with cultural, technological, legal, and ethical knowledge, guide them, scare the crap out of them, demand their submission and obedience, have sex with them (often forcefully), and generally terrorize, awe, baffle, inspire, and use them. This history of religions is the broadest context and grammar of *Communion*. Nothing anomalous or meaningless there, even if it is all, of course, impossible in *our* modern materialist register and assumptions, themselves all very recent, and no doubt very temporary.

Now step forward, say, halfway to the TV screen: not so close that you just see individual pixels, but not too far away either, so you can still see the images and stories on the screen. Similarly, this "little picture" or more immediate temporal and spatial context of Whitley's initial experiences work powerfully against any anecdotal reading.

Whitley briefly invokes these larger historical contexts in the previous chapter when he writes: "As yet, I was not aware of all the strange sightings across the Hudson in Duchess County, which would become famous as the Hudson Valley UFO sightings." Indeed. The geographical locale of Strieber's abduction experience is a well-known and well-documented hot spot for UFO activity throughout the twentieth century. Consider the following.

The first major "UFO flap" in the United States was the airship mystery of 1896–97, during which hundreds of sightings of craft flying over major U.S. cities, often with spotlights or "lanterns" no less, were reported in the newspapers from California to New York. According to Whitley, an airship floated over San Antonio in May of 1897 and must have flown over Strieber's great-grandmother's house.[22] This was six years before the Wright Brothers managed to get their first dangerous contraption a few feet off the ground in Kittyhawk, North Carolina. The nature of these sightings remains controversial and ambiguous, and many of them were no doubt hoaxes or misreported, but one thing is clear: they *were* widely reported, and these reports are part of the historical record and so a part of the larger historical context of the later sightings.

Another major wave of sightings occurred about a decade later, in 1909–10, this time centered in the Hudson Valley region. On July 26, 1909, the *Newburgh Daily Journal* ran this headline: "AIR SHIP" IS SEEN AGAIN FROM WASHINGTON HEIGHTS: SHE WAS SWOOPING: TOO DARK, IT IS SAID, TO DISCERN OUTLINES OF THE "SHIP." And here is what *The Sun* of New York City reported a few days later, on August 1: "A mysterious airship which flies only at night is causing considerable excitement and keeping the people of Orange county residing between Goshen and Newburgh up nights in their efforts to get a look at it." And here is my favorite piece, under the headline "HUMAN VOLCANO ERUPTS," from the *Goshen Democrat* four days later, on August 5:

> *Otto Pushman, Newburgh's champion cusser, had been sent to jail for thirty days for using sulfurous language. During the nocturnal hours of Tuesday he was discovered on Grand Street looking for that ding-blasted airship that the Newburgh papers tell about and cursing fervently at the blankty-blanked moon.*

As this precious piece reveals and as author Linda Zimmerman emphasizes through an analysis of other newspaper pieces from the same year (one of which featured mocking cartoons and an invocation of Santa Claus), one can see "all the elements of denials, ridiculous excuses, hoaxers, and belittled witnesses already in place, more than 100 years ago!"[23]

Zimmerman has written two books tracing the UFO phenomenon in the Hudson Valley region from 1909 to the present. What she finds is a dizzying array of phenomena not unlike those we find later in the century: "airships" and later "spaceships" in the sky ranging from baseball size glowing balls to huge floating Vs (including her own sighting); an immense circular metallic craft with colored lights and symbols that hovered just above the heads of a mother and her twelve-year-old son close enough to hit with a rock; two early abduction reports (from 1929 and 1937) involving things like time standing still, floating humanoids in "diving suits," and a sense of being in two worlds at once; encounters that result in the witnesses developing various psychical capacities, particularly telepathy and precognition (an extremely common pattern in such encounters to this day); a bizarre vision of two immense "wheels" on their side (vaguely reminiscent of Ezekiel's "wheels" and also reported as a spinning "ferris wheel" in the 1980s); an eyeball-to-eyeball encounter with a long-necked green humanoid flying in a circular craft right beside a traveling car; a large pile of sand blown to smithereens with circular landing marks burned into the cement (with attending photographs); UFOs surrounded by helicopters or helicopters apparently searching for UFOs; and numerous stories of scared dogs, cats, and birds.[24]

Zimmerman also deals with some cases outside the Hudson Valley, including my personal favorite: a sighting in a backyard outside of Chicago in 1992 of a seven-foot humanoid with an apparent tail teleporting from tree to tree whose description sounds, to me anyway, *exactly* like Nightcrawler of the X-Men. The thing even displayed Nightcrawler's signature cobalt blue flash when it instantaneously "jumped" from place to place.[25] This is well before the movies, but not before Nightcrawler himself, who was introduced in a comic book in 1975. What to do?

The spooked dogs, cats, and birds are also especially interesting, as they strongly suggest that these events had some kind of biological or physical existence outside the subjective psyches of the witnesses, that is, outside the phenomenological cut. I think an entire book could easily be written on UFOs and our canine and feline companions. Whitley himself has written about the physiological effects different visitor phenomena had on their pet cats, including above again.[26]

Moreover, and worse still for the anecdotal thesis, it was the 1980s that saw the strongest spike in reports of sightings and up-close encounters in the Hudson Valley. The Northwestern University astronomer and air force scientific consultant J. Allen Hynek, the researcher Philip J. Imbrogno, and the journalist Bob Pratt dedicated an entire volume to this subject, with a later edition (after Hynek's death) claiming some 7,046 reported cases in the Hudson Valley from 1982 to 1995.

Particularly important here, since it temporally wraps around the Strieber case, is the three-year flap—beginning on New Year's Eve, 1982, and petering out throughout 1986—that featured something that came to be known as the "Westchester Boomerang," basically an immense triangular-shaped craft repeatedly floating over the region. The thing was described variously as "a flying city," "as large as an aircraft carrier," "as big as a football field," and like "something out of the movie *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*."[27] As is so often the case, the sci-fi references were irresistible.

Not that the immense thing behaved like a thing. It could appear and disappear instantly, vanishing, as one witness put it, "like the Cheshire Cat's smile." It was often described as completely silent. Or in uncanny religious terms: "It just hung there motionless in the sky. It was like seeing a ghost." Squadrons of helicopters were seen in the night skies during some of these sightings, as well as unidentified planes flying in formation, which the witnesses believed were sent up by the military to confuse the matter and provide a bogus explanation to the public.[28] The public was not tricked, or amused.

After two books on the Hudson Valley material, Zimmerman's conclusion seems reasonable enough: the Hudson Valley region is a UFO hotspot. And it was *here* that Whitley Strieber had his own abduction

experiences over the Christmas holidays of 1985, right smack in the middle of the most active decade of the twentieth century, during a spike in that same decade, and after at least seventy-seven years of similar encounters in the same area that included not one or two reported sightings, but *thousands*.

Such cultural and geographical contexts do not explain these experiences or offer us any definitive answer. I am certain that the reports are not all of the same quality or reliability, and, as we have seen, some of them were simply mocking. Accordingly, I do not wish to take a particular position on these records, much less on this or that individual sighting. We simply have not done the hard historical, textual, ethnographic, and scientific work that would warrant or authorize any such definitive position. As a culture, we have barely begun such a project. But, taken as a whole, such historical materials certainly dispel any notion that Strieber must be a kook, or that his honest descriptions and dramatic sufferings can somehow be brushed aside as lacking any meaningful context, as anecdotal or anomalous. They were in historical and contextual fact nothing of the sort.

That is one big reason I continue to listen to Whitley Strieber.

The Earth-Farm

There is one other thing to say about the Hudson Valley, and it is a biggie in my opinion. It is obvious enough, but no one, to my knowledge, has noted it. It is this: Albany, New York, was the birthplace and childhood home of the man who did more than *anyone* to shape the American paranormal: Charles Fort. Jim Steinmeyer has given us a wonderful biography of Fort.[29] I have done my best to summarize Fort's sophisticated comparative practice.[30] Here I can only sketch the barest of outlines.

In four weird and wonderful books written between 1919 and 1932 (*The Book of the Damned*, *New Lands*, *Lo!*, and *Wild Talents*), Fort laid down the paradoxical, both-and, real-unreal, mental-material nature of paranormal phenomena, which he humorously called "the damned" for the ways that religion and science so anxiously denied, condemned, and ignored these constantly reported events/experiences. It was Fort again who

began to speculate about the meaning and purpose of what he called "super-constructions" in the sky. There were no "UFOs" or "flying saucers" yet, although many of Fort's descriptions are astonishingly close, like the man's in 1871 who saw a thing fall from the sky, "oscillating from side to side like a disc falling through water," that is, exactly like flying saucers would be seen descending in the next century.[31] Then there were his many speculations about abductions, which he framed in his typical humorous, not quite grammatical way, like this: "Whether spacarians have ever dredged down here or not, or 'sniped' down here, pouncing, assailing, either wantonly, or in the interests of their sciences, and I have strong objections against lugging in the fourth dimension, because then I am no better off, wondering what the fifth and sixth are like."[32]

Or more bluntly: "I think that we're fished for."[33]

But all of this, at least as we think we know it now, would come later, partly because of Charles Fort. It was this man's speculations that were picked up by the pulp-fiction subculture of the 1930s and '40s (the pulps even serialized sections from his books), which in turn morphed into modern science-fiction literature in the 1950s and '60s. Fort is one of the fathers of all of this.

Fort, however, did not make the mistakes of the reductive and religious comparativists of today. He was a very special kind of skeptic. Indeed, he was extremely critical of two common ways of demonizing or dismissing anomalous events: what he called the Dominant of Religion (related to what I have called religious comparison) and the Dominant of Science (related to what I have called reductive comparison). He made fun of both by simply demonstrating how they really didn't work to explain the full scope of the data and how they both took certain things off the table so that they could pretend that they were explaining everything.

It is worth repeating. It is very easy to claim a theory of everything if you get to decide what that everything is. It is very easy to explain everything on the table if you have put everything you cannot explain underneath it in the wastebasket.

Fort sought to move beyond these two dominant ways of knowing into a third Dominant, what he called (not so eloquently) "Intermediatism" or (a little better) the "philosophy of the hyphen," by which he basically meant to

refer to events that were physical and mental or real and unreal at the same time. It is a similar still future, frankly paradoxical, deeply spiritual, deeply materialist way of knowing and understanding our world that Whitley and I are re-visioning as the super natural.

Fort, who spent his adult life reading and writing at the southern end of the Hudson Valley, that is, in New York City, considered some very entertaining, and occasionally very dark, possibilities with respect to all of these superstructures in the sky. For example, he often invoked the experience of the Native Americans around 1492, when they first witnessed those immense, anomalous ships floating in the bays. It would not go well for them, Fort noted.

Then he got darker (and weirder). Earth might not be a "new land" or a galactic colony. It might be a farm. This would certainly explain why the visitors do not establish any open contact or attempt communication with us. Why should they?

> *Would we, if we could, educate and sophisticate pigs, geese, cattle?*
>
> *Would it be wise to establish diplomatic relation with the hen that now functions, satisfied with mere sense of achievement by way of compensation?*
>
> *I think we're property.*[34]

Or again: "I should say that we're now under cultivation; that we're conscious of it, but have the impertinence to attribute it all to our own nobler and higher instincts," which is to say: to our religious instincts and beliefs.[35]

This dark thought of a kind of galactic seeding, alien husbandry, or earth-farm secretly working below (or above) our mythologies and religions would have a long and rich history in the later science fiction, of course, up to and including Ridley Scott's recent film *Prometheus* (2012). But it is not just a sci-fi notion. None other than the Harvard psychologist and philosopher William James had advanced a more domestic, less sci-fi version in a related context, that of the spirit world suggested by his own extensive psychical research with mediums. More specifically, James

wondered if our relationship to the otherworld of the spirits and the dead was not like that our pets have in relationship to our world. He wrote the following stunning lines in *A Pluralistic Universe*:

> *In spite of rationalism's disdain for the particular, the personal, and the unwholesome [the modern debunker's anecdotal], the drift of all the evidence we have seems to me to sweep us very strongly towards the belief in some form of superhuman life with which we may, unknown to ourselves, be co-conscious. We may be in the universe as dogs and cats are in our libraries, seeing the books and hearing the conversation, but having no inkling of the meaning of it all.*[36]

In any case, James's "superhuman life" is precisely what Fort was writing about. Hence his affection for the prefix super-, which he attached to pretty much everything: super-constructions, super-vehicles, super-mind, super-sight, super-imagination, super-religion, even super-sociology. Hence also his extensive focus on the "wild talents" or superpowers of paranormal people.

Although this is pure speculation on my part, I cannot help but wonder if behind (or above) all of this super-writing floated some personal sighting in those haunted Hudson Valley skies, or even some private "abduction" experience. Charles Fort certainly would not have been the first to see things in that sky or experience such an encounter in that haunted valley. Nor would he, of course, be the last.

Biological Gods

These speculations of James on the pet in the library and Fort on the earth-farm are highly relevant to our present subject, and this for at least two reasons. First, because, as Whitley describes in the previous chapter and as Anne discovered reading through the hundreds of thousands of letters that *Communion* invoked, the dead are often seen within abduction events. Second, many of Whitley's speculations about the meaning of his own

experiences are clearly "Fortean" in their paradoxical thing-thought structure. This is especially evident in the last chapter of *Communion*, entitled "A Structure in the Air: Science, History, and Secret Knowledge."

By far, the most difficult aspect of Whitley's "structure in the air," for a traditional academic anyway, is his suggestion that these experiences might represent an encounter with other actual species, invisible life-forms existing in some other dimension of the natural world that overlaps with ours and whose occasional rupture into our dimension is always mediated by our cultural imagination. This, of course, is not simply a theory about the visitors. It is a radical, and deeply critical, theory of religion as well, since it implies that these invisible life-forms have been interacting with us for millennia under various mythical forms that we have traditionally (mis)framed in supernatural terms. In Strieber's elegant phrase, it appears that the visitors "were somehow trying to hide themselves in our folklore."[37]

Others had suggested something similar with respect to the flying saucers and the folklore, and in very sophisticated forms, before Whitley, including John Keel, Jacques Vallee, and Eddie Bullard. But there is something more "physical," "realist," or "biological" about Strieber's suggestions. Here is how he put the matter in the 2008 preface to *Communion*: "But the visitors are not only real and here. In fact, I don't think they are visitors at all. I think that the truth is that we are embedded in their world in the same way that animal species are embedded in ours. It was hard to accept, but as I got to know some of them, I began to see that their relationship to us was quite similar to ours with, say, chimpanzees. . . ."[38] Later in this same text, and again in this one, Whitley compares himself and his terrified reactions to the presence of the female visitor to a wild, frightened bucking ranch horse. He was being "broken."

Shades of Fort's pigs on the farm and James's cat in the library.

What sets Whitley's model apart is how interactive it is, how it relies on us to manifest the other species. This interactive model is advanced through multiple frames, including that of the triad or triangle in the history of mythology and the bizarre implications of quantum physics, which, as has been amply noted by physicists and enthusiasts alike, has reintroduced consciousness and intention back into the scientific picture in dramatic and

baffling ways. In this interpretation of quantum physics, the result of an experiment is partially determined by what the physicist decides, that is, how he or she chooses to set up the experiment. The result then is not simply "objective." It is "subjective" and "objective" at the same time. The entire system is interactive.

Whitley takes this interactive model very far, suggesting, in effect, that the visitors may rely on our beliefs to appear: "Thus the corridor into our world could in a very true sense be through our own minds."[39] He is not after simple belief here. He is not a fan of the contactee "eager to see the phenomenon as a dimensionless cartoon of space friends." He is after something much more complex and interesting. Here is how he ends the book:

> *The visitor experience may be our first true quantum discovery in the large-scale world. The very act of observing it may be creating it as a concrete actuality, with sense, definition, and a consciousness of its own. And perhaps, in their world, the visitors are working as hard to create us. Truly, such an act of mutual insight and courage would be communion. . . . Who knows, maybe really skilled observation and genuine insight will cause the visitors to come bursting to the surface shaking like coelacanths in a net.*[40]

Note that there is no stable subject or object here. There is a weird, mind-bending, mirrorlike moment in which the viewer and the viewed bring each other into existence through their mutual intentions and gazes. *This* is what Whitley means by "communion." I will take up this communion again in my next chapter, there through the conjuring practices of reading and writing and that mystery of consciousness we so banally call "interpretation."

Keep observing. Keep turning the pages. Keep letting go. Keep the apocalypse going. The Already World is shining through.

6

Lying in the Lap of the Goddess

WHITLEY

This ancient human experience not only rends the veil between the living and the dead, it penetrates deeply into sexuality. If we take the position that modern close encounter experiences are essentially the same phenomenon of contact that we have been perceiving through all of our history, then this aspect of them, also, fits long experiential tradition.

It is with this in mind, then, that I seek now to explore the ways in which my experiences have engaged me sexually. It's a subject that I am extremely reticent to talk about. I am a very private person when it comes to sexuality. Prior to meeting my wife, I was sexually intimate with a woman only once, and since then my entire experience has been with Anne—that is to say, my conventional experience.

My unconventional sexual life has been wildly promiscuous, fearsomely intense, at times even somewhat perverse—or at least, what this very conventional man would regard as perverse. Of course, I've hardly ever written or spoken about it. As I have said, it took me twenty-five years even to admit to my wife that I had been raped. But that was only one small incident. There is much more.

I have never wanted to write about it, to some degree because of the prurient stupidity that I fear it will elicit in people addicted to sensation and looking for the next lurid tale of "alien sex." There is a deeper reason, though. This is because it was so very beautiful. I am haunted by the paradoxical sweetness of many of these ferocious experiences. One way to put it would be to say that I had a love affair with a goddess. Another would be that it was an affair with an alien. But the third way to describe it—which is, I suspect, closer to the truth—is that I didn't know who or what my wife really was, or myself, or any of us. I don't know what human beings are, and, based on my own life experience, I have every reason to suspect that the form we live in every day of our lives is not our only state. Unless, of course, it is what one of our letter writers was told when she asked her visitor who he was. He responded, "It is me within thee." So, not only an interstellar astronaut piloting a spaceship.

Sometimes when Anne was sleeping or distracted or her face blossomed with pleasure, I would see in it a flickering shadow of the great-eyed being I'd painted for the cover of *Communion*. Now, I am not making a claim here that my wife was an alien or anything nearly so concrete as that. What I am saying is that the shadow of my wife—her life, her ways, my awareness of her body—ghosts through the experiences that I am about to describe like a sylph.

Over the years, I told her a few of these stories. As they seemed like a great betrayal of our marriage, I was very hesitant to do this, but also ashamed not to. I had experienced such powerful emotions during the experiences that I felt that they were a profound invasion of my vow to her. As they had not apparently been initiated by me, and I didn't have the impression that I could have stopped them, I wasn't sure that I had violated it, but the pleasure that they had brought me made me very uneasy about my moral position.

My self-valuation is deeply connected to what are now regarded as outdated ideals, most especially honor. To have honor, I feel that one must lead a life in truthfulness and honesty. One must keep one's vows. I would never presume to extend my own values to others, nor to judge them if their values are different from mine. But I would basically never, ever break a vow, and I feel that the marriage vow is the most sacred of them all for any common man like me. A great leader—a president, for example—may take

a more important vow, I suppose, to defend the country, but for someone in the ordinary way of life, my marriage vow was central to my honor and thus inviolate.

But I violated it. Not technically, as I have said, but in my heart, helplessly and certainly. For I fell in love with this being and am still in love with her and always will be. I also love my wife deeply and passionately, but if this woman were to come back to me, I would be unable to resist opening my arms to her, and that's the truth of it.

I'd assumed that Anne would be furious when she heard me tell of my various assignations with this being, but she took it all in stride, so much so that I came to wonder what her level of involvement really is. Could Anne be one with the woman depicted on the cover of *Communion*? Are they the same person in two different forms, or do I perceive her that way—and by extension, do we all sometimes perceive others around us as being in different forms? If so, then sexually staid Whitley and Anne and sexually wild Whitley and Anne share a kind of mandala-like existence, a conventional relationship and an unconventional one rotating around each other, enclosed in a circle that, as it is a form without final measure, contains an infinity of possibilities.

In considering the idea that humanity may have more than one form, I would like to refer to an event that took place when I was out touring for *Communion* in 1988. I got back to my hotel to discover that I had a phone message from my editor, Jim Landis, then at William Morrow and Company. When I telephoned him, he said, "I have good news and bad news." Of course, I demanded the bad news first. He answered that the visitors thought that *Communion* was full of mistakes. Then he added, "The good news is that we all believe you now." I was perplexed, because I'd had the impression that Jim and the rest of the staff at Morrow took my story with a substantial grain of salt. In fact, I didn't think that they believed me at all.

It turned out that another editor, Bruce Lee, had been checking stock in the old Madison Avenue Bookshop when he had noticed two people looking through a copy of the book. They were turning pages very rapidly and laughing together. When he went closer, he could hear that they were saying that I'd gotten this wrong or that wrong, then paging along and snickering.

But how could they know? How could they be so sure? When he walked up to them to ask, they stopped and looked at him. He was shocked to see huge, glistening eyes just like the ones the being on the cover of the book had. He found the eyes absolutely terrifying, and decided to leave the shop. When he walked out, they followed him, chatting together in what he thought of as Jewish accents. He watched them walk off into the afternoon crowd on Madison Avenue. Nobody seemed in the least concerned that two aliens were strolling down the street in overcoats and hats on a warm afternoon. He told me that people would look right at them and not react at all.

I found this all very hard to believe. At that time, I was debating in my own mind whether or not the experience was real or imaginal—that is to say, a tangible presence somehow generated by the imagination. At my insistence, Bruce took and passed a lie detector test and stuck to his story, so I finally accepted that he was at least reporting his perceptions as he had seen them.

In a similar case in 2004, Adrian Hicks, a member of the Winchester town council in Great Britain, saw what appeared to him to be a humanoid alien walking in ballet shoes down a crowded shopping street. He said, "I was near the Works bookshop when I saw this strange woman, a humanoid walking with a penguinlike gait. She had very large prominent eyes and was twirling her hands in a circular motion. She seemed friendly and totally at ease with us. She wasn't scared, she was smiling, and seemed to be enjoying herself among us. She walked very slowly up the High Street. I remember she was very interested in the clock over Lloyds Bank. She was human enough to get away with it. Everybody's heads were turning."

He also recalled a woman taking pictures of her, and other witnesses, but to my knowledge nobody has ever come forward. Given his position in political life, one would think him very foolish to invent such a story, and I doubt that he did. I wonder, though, what he actually did see, what Bruce Lee saw, and what my dear "alien" lover, of precious memory, really is.

I have been sifting through the grains of my life looking for where this may have begun. When I was a child, as I mentioned in *The Secret School*, a white owl used to stand at the edge of our backyard and stare up at my windows. While I still cannot say that much of what I remember, or have imagined, of those days exists outside of my mind, family members do

recall the white owl, and my parents were disturbed enough about what appeared to be nocturnal excursions on my part to have had the screens on the windows of my room nailed shut.

I remember a nun on whom I had a terrific crush—who, when I was ten and eleven was my heroine and my most precious friend. I can recall meeting her behind the old sisters' home that is still on the grounds of the University of the Incarnate Word in San Antonio. She is, however, confused in my mind with another glorious older woman, Aileen Carter, who had an observatory on the roof of her mansion and used to hold astronomy classes there. The nun taught about the drama of evolution, dinosaurs, and the shimmering movement of God's hand across time, drawing life toward the knowledge of him. I would say, now, that something was certainly drawing life somewhere, but for me it has turned out to be in the direction of question rather than belief. Mrs. Carter taught of the vastness of the universe and the sacredness of creation. Both women were deeply religious, but both women, as I look back, taught good science, as it was understood in the 1950s.

In *The Secret School*, I portray myself as riding my bicycle down to the Carter place at night. But this would have been a daunting task for a child, and I really cannot believe that I did it, especially not at night, any more than I went to the spot behind the old sisters' home in the wee hours, as I also recall doing.

I did go to classes at Mrs. Carter's house, and I might well have gone to the old sisters' home some afternoons with my mother, and could well have been befriended by one of the old teachers, eager to enjoy a last student. The night journeys, I assume, are imaginary.

When I was writing *The Secret School*, I experienced a vibrant thrill, though, and remembered how, when I reached puberty, the wonderful excursions ended. And no matter the degree to which they were imaginary, they suffused my life then with a grand romance, and left me with a reverence for the world around us that is as strong today as it was when I was a boy.

There was, in these experiences, an unformed longing toward the drama of women. I did not relate to either woman sexually, of course, but deep within my body there was something stirring that would emerge more overtly when I came face-to-face with the woman on the cover of

Communion, and found in her both the authority and gentleness of my teachers and the brilliance and sensuality of my wife.

In my life, I have had four very powerful sexual experiences. The first one occurred when I was just coming into puberty. I was camping out on the front lawn with some neighborhood children. In a late hour when all was quiet, somebody suggested that we take a walk through the neighborhood naked. Of course I was keen for the adventure. When we stripped off our clothes, I saw that one of the boys, older than me, had an erection. This caused the girls to giggle. At that point, I had not had anything explained to me about sex. I suppose that I'd had erections myself, but this was the first one I had ever noticed.

I thought he was deformed, and made elaborate efforts not to seem too appalled. I thought his penis had turned into a horn. No wonder the girls found it funny, poor guy.

In any case, off we went on our adventure. There were five or six of us, as I recall.

It was really amazing to feel the night air on my skin and to actually cross the street naked. We had gone down through the yards on the other side, and were just coming out onto the next street when car lights suddenly blazed through the darkness, a siren wailed, and a red light began flashing atop a police car.

The other kids, who were all behind me, headed back toward our front yard. I was too far out in the street. I had no choice but to run to the far side. I ended up skulking through the neighborhood while the cop drove up and down the streets with his lights off trying to trap me.

Finally, I found myself on the estate of some friends. They had a lot of trees, a sort of artificial forest, and I climbed one of them—still naked, of course. Although I got scratched, the sensuality of it, the caress of the night wind, the air redolent with night-blooming flowers, quite overcame me. The intensity of the experience caused me to also get an erection. In amazement, I touched it—and nearly fell right out of the tree, such pleasure did my fingers bring me.

Down below, the cop was shining his flashlight into one bush after another and saying, "All right, I've got you, come on out." He sounded very authoritative, but obviously, I was not there. While he was trying to find

what, it turned out later, had been reported as naked dwarfs, I was in the tree touching myself, shuddering with wonder and shaking with guilt.

The waves of pleasure were delicious. Up in the tree, I could not only smell the flowers of the night, but also the rich odor of the sea, even though the Gulf of Mexico was over a hundred miles away. But that was a long time ago, when the sea was still rich with life.

Finally, I took my hand off myself. I was beginning to wonder if it was permitted to feel pleasure like that. It was so nice, surely it was a sin. At school, the nuns had cautioned us to not even look down at our nakedness while we were bathing. So perhaps I had annoyed Jesus.

I sat watching the cop as he continued poking around. He must have been very eager to get to the bottom of the strange complaint. He would have wanted badly to find out what the naked dwarfs were up to.

Eventually, though, he gave up. I watched the lights of the squad car flicker away down the street. Still, I waited a bit, just to be sure that it wasn't some sort of trick. Eventually, I went down and returned to the house, slipping along the edges of yards and through back alleys.

The other kids were still there, huddled in their sleeping bags. They had been praying for me.

The next morning, my mother told me that there could be no more campouts that summer, as naked dwarfs had been seen creeping through the neighborhood. I listened solemnly, and did not argue.

After that, girls, whom I had previously hardly noticed, took on a delicious glow in my eyes. I was in a Catholic boy's school, though, and had access only to the neighborhood girls I had grown up with. It didn't matter, though. It was as if they had become entirely different human beings. I longed to be with them, to just talk to them, to maybe kiss them if they would let me. My ardor confused them. What had changed? Why not just play like we always had? Had I gone crazy?

Of course I had. I'd been sexualized.

Thus began a familiar phase of life, the desperate and ludicrous courtship rituals of the inept young male. Years later, when I was about sixteen, I was briefly touched by a girl, and touched her in return. Although I was as eager about sex as any boy, the manners of the time and place meant that I never went so far as to make love. Until I met Anne, that is.

She was not from an old southern family. She was not constrained by archaic scruples. She enjoyed sex in a very normal and open way, and she found me attractive. So we were soon rolling around in bed together in the same joyous, unrestrained, delightful way that we did for the forty-five years of our married life. So my second great sexual experience was not one event, but rather a lifetime of joyous union. On that first night, she was not ready to go to bed with me. I had never before acted this way toward a girl, but I simply insisted. I could not stop myself. She had inspired me, driven me to desperation. We embraced, we fell into one another, we went deep, and we were still there when she died, nearly half a century later, still amazed, full of adventure, surprised.

And now I turn to this other woman, if she is a woman, or, for that matter, a person at all. She has provided me with the other two great sexual experiences of my life, and I don't even know if she exists!

And yet when I write of her in this way—exploring the notion that she might exist only as some sort of figment or wraith—I feel a deep sense of disloyalty. Speaking of sin, it feels sinful and duplicitous, as if such a suggestion is a cruel lie, and one which will be hurtful to the most sensitive person I have ever known.

I think of her as an aristocrat, a princess, someone grandly born and of great attainments. I believe her to be deep in my life, and that *The Secret School* is a chronicle of the period in which I entered her orbit, in a childhood filled with magic.

With the coming of puberty, though, she and her kind withdrew from my life. I can remember thinking that they had been coming to me out of the walls, and trying to get to them by going into the crawlspace behind the clothes hamper in the children's bathroom. I remember begging them to come back.

They would, but not at once. Prior to coming into communion with this great being, I would go on a long journey of preparation. My enormous experiences with her—really, beyond sexual, they were so intense and felt so deeply holy—would come to me only after half a lifetime of spiritual search and fifteen years of intensive inner work in the Gurdjieff Foundation, exploring the process of looking out at the world and back at oneself at the same time, and learning from this work that there are realms of

consciousness all around—cathedrals of consciousness—of which we are generally unaware.

Only when I left the foundation, which caused me grave anguish, but which I knew was necessary, did she appear once again in my life, that dangerous, wonderful night bird who has been my secret teacher, mistress, and lover over all of my days.

My spiritual search began in a confessional at Mount Sacred Heart School in San Antonio, when I informed the priest that I didn't believe the Old Testament. I did not believe that god had created the world in seven days, that Adam and Eve had been formally tossed out of a garden called Eden, that Jonah had been swallowed by a whale, or that a god worth worshiping would have amused himself by causing Job all that misery.

The silence that followed my remarks was, as I recall, long. Finally, he said that perhaps I should just forget the Old Testament and try the New. I did, but as I was intensely interested in Roman history, I soon discovered while struggling through a translation of Origen's *Contra Celsus* I'd found at the public library that the Mass was derived from secret Mithriac rites that had started in Tarsus, which was, coincidentally, also where Paul had grown up. Then I noticed, while reading Roman history that the "good news" proclaimed in the gospels was strikingly similar to the good news proclamation spread across the empire by Augustus after he established the *Pax Romana.* In fact, it looked as if Paul had plagiarized it. In Jeff's language, I was *comparing*, and the results were severe ones.

By my middle teens, I had become disengaged from religion, but not from the spiritual journey. I had a strong sense of the presence of soul within me. In fact, I began to see that body and soul are really a continuity, not two separate entities, and I began, at the age of seventeen or eighteen, to attempt to meditate. I could feel that I extended in some way beyond the physical. I sensed that a new sort of integration was possible, that the body did not actually end with the flesh, but was somehow extended into regions of being of which I knew almost nothing.

I briefly embraced Buddhism. I read *Siddhartha* and contemplated going to Asia after high school and becoming a dharma bum. But ultimately I found the same defect in Buddhism that I had in Christianity. Both of them —and all religions—promote structural visions of the unseen world, and are based on the assumption that their particular vision is accurate. But how

could that be so, given that their founders had, at best, a very unclear and limited idea of how the universe is constructed? It wasn't until the early twentieth century that it even began to be realized that there were galaxies beyond our own. Until the work of Heber Curtis (1872–1942) in 1917, we had no inkling of the true size of the universe. Religionists might consider this unimportant, but I don't see how we can really think about a deity with any clarity unless we also think about scale, and I have a problem with that. It was a big problem for me when I was eighteen. It is insurmountable now. Over those years, our understanding of the size of the universe has changed to the point that the vastness of it is now quite literally beyond imagining. More incredibly, the condition of the background microwave radiation suggests that it has collided with other universes from time to time. In other words, beyond this tremendous flow of galaxies that we call "the" universe, there may be other such structures just as large. And, of course, there is the enigma of parallel universes possibly being physically real also.

All of this has led me to consider the possibility that the firmament might be endless, or at least so much more enormous than we can conceive that it is not possible to confine it paradigmatically, let alone in any religious context. How could a reality so huge have a single creator or, for that matter, any creator at all? It simply is, and in that thought I find rich meaning and spiritual sustenance.

Later, I also explored atheism, which was closer to my heart than the other religions, but I found, during a conversation with an editor from the *New York Times Book Review* at a literary event, that it was just as much doctrine as the other religions. He was a brilliant and articulate man, and the only avowed atheist I had met who had the ability to actually explain his reasons for the choice that he had made. But I found that he preached atheism in the same way that I had heard Catholicism and Buddhism preached, as truth. In other words, a faith.

This was because his atheism went a step further than it should if it is to remain attached to the question. It did not contemplate the possible absence of a deity, but excluded god and all nonphysical beings, and, in fact, this is almost universal in atheism today. It now offers two main assertions. The first is that there is no god. The second is that all consciousness, if there is such a thing, is an outcome of brain activity. There is no god and we are only flesh. But I think a more adequate response,

based on the vast and ancient evidence of the numinous, is that there is unlikely to be a god and we don't know what we are.

It is possible to be an atheist and still recognize the evidence that there are aspects of being that we don't understand—that is, if one can resist the temptation to turn it into a religion.

What is useful to me, contemplatively, is to regard our isolation in the spectacle of immensity that is reality, and to consider how very many possibilities it must contain. We are lost in the stars, which I find both a source of wonder and foundational to freedom of thought. This is because it offers all but endless possibilities, and because my life is rich with evidence of the reality of the numinous, I am released to search as my fancy takes me, rather than riding the rails of belief, and no matter the religion, even if it's atheism.

It is possible to experience mind outside of body without religion. It is even possible to conjure expressions from it. I have done this many times, and seen it done by others. I have sat on a quiet hillside with UFO enthusiasts shining flashlights at the sky and seen bright orbs come and dance about overhead. Rather than settle on the assumption that we have called alien spaceships with our flashlights, I have let myself come to rest in the question, and found there what to me is truly holy ground, a mystery that can neither be ignored nor solved.

To me, the question is what G. I. Gurdjieff called "holy the firm." That is to say, the only firm ground in human life is the seemingly uneasy ground of question, especially question that can neither be answered nor left unanswered.

He described "holy the firm" as "nothing." But nothing is not, well, *nothing*, is it? For those of us who enjoy the conundrum intrinsic to that fundamental question of philosophy, "why is there something rather than nothing," nothing both must and cannot be. This is shadowed in physics, which offers evidence that the vacuum is, in fact, not empty. For example, the Casimir effect suggests that nothing contains energy—that it is, indeed, not *nothing*. It could be that events happening on the Planck scale—the really, really tiny—have durations that are too short to be measurable. In other words, they reflect the conundrum in a slightly different way: "nothing is unmeasurable."

I was introduced to the work of G. I. Gurdjieff in 1970 by a man I met while a Director's Guild trainee. At his suggestion, Anne and I read P. D. Ouspensky's book *In Search of the Miraculous* and began attending meetings at the Gurdjieff Foundation in Manhattan. There were three reasons that the Work drew me. The first was that, behind the eccentric word-salad of Gurdjieff's prose, I saw a spiritual journey without a religious component. There was material of real value to be found by patiently decoding his peculiar vision of the universe, largely because it was so open-ended and internally contradictory that, unlike religions, it forced one into a state of question, which was its intention. Additionally, the basic ideas, as expressed by the more conventionally articulate Ouspensky, were powerful. Reality was formed of triads with active, passive, and balancing sides. Events unfolded in octaves, like music. One could find the action of triads and octaves everywhere in life, and find them also in deep thought and to some extent in the esotericism of the past. In one of my novels, *The Grays*, the aliens are divided into triads, with one always advocating action, the second warning of danger, and the third reconciling the ideas of the other two and moving the triad forward. This is because close encounters so often begin with a triangle of stars crossing the sky.

Grouping by threes is an important part of the way the visitors present themselves to us, and I noticed from the beginning that my relationship with them was structured around ideas that I had learned in the Gurdjieff Work, most particularly, a method of meditation that facilitated communication with them.

But that was for the future. Under the instruction of foundation leaders Joseph Stein and William C. Segal, I began meditation practice, which involved placing the attention on the body and letting the mind go along on its own. Later, when I would do this in the presence of the visitors, they would be able to access my mind, and there would be communication. Without this skill, I cannot see that my interactions with them would ever have become as rich as they did.

In 1983, I left formal engagement with the Gurdjieff Foundation, on the theory that I would either continue my inner work on my own, without the support of weekly group meetings, or I would slip back into the less acute consciousness that is associated with ordinary life.

As I have said, that was when she reappeared—when a real master showed up in my life. It began with me being roughed up—finally raped—until I noticed her presence, and with it a profound truth that we seem almost hardwired to filter out and ignore.

What is this truth?

Well, another teacher I had in the Gurdjieff Work, P. L. Travers, expressed it most eloquently. While she was famous as the author of Mary Poppins, she was also deeply involved in the Work, an aspect of her life that she kept very private. She used to come to visit the New York Gurdjieff Foundation annually. We met during one of her journeys, and started up a friendship and correspondence. She was a flawed, brilliant, damaged, and wise human being, who was able to bare herself in our conversations, thus drawing me to my own flaws and strengths, and enabling me to learn how it is that holy ground, foundational and fundamental to all real search, is as shifting and elusive as quantum indeterminacy.

She used to ask those of us who would gather around her, "Do you know what it means to lie in the lap of the goddess? It means to be unsure."

And then there came the great wave of the two experiences that shattered me at every level of my being, experiences that crackled with sensuality, that ripped away my ego as a hurricane rips away a city, leaving me in ruins.

7

What Evolution Looks Like

JEFF

He who fights with monsters should look to it that he himself does not become a monster. And when you gaze long into an abyss the abyss also gazes into you.

Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*[41]

Instead of shunning the darkness, we can face straight into it with an open mind. When we do that, the unknown changes. Fearful things become understandable and a truth is suggested: the enigmatic presence of the human mind winks back from the dark.

Whitley Strieber, *Communion*

We have now explored together three ways of approaching the UFO phenomenon in a way that does not pretend any easy answers but avoids the pitfalls of both the doctrinaire believer and the dogmatic debunker. We have carved out a middle ground—a version of Whitley's "spiritual practice without religious belief." First, we have brought our comparative practice into sharper focus through a discussion of religious and reductive comparisons, neither of which quite work with the striking similarities and real differences that we see across cultures and times. Second, we have taken up phenomenology in order to "make a cut" between that which appears and that which is in Whitley's strange

experiences. And third, we have practiced historical contextualization in order to better locate, understand, and acknowledge the commonality of these experiences.

In each case, we have seen how these methods or techniques can bring precision to a public conversation that was previously imprecise or simply confused. We have also seen, in each case, how the practice in question can make reasonable that which was previously unreasonable, how it can make the impossible possible. We take up a fourth practice now. I will warn you: it is way trippier than the first three.

The Secrets of Hermes

Let us call this fourth practice *hermeneutics*. You can translate the word simply as "interpretation," but it is way weirder than that. Fundamentally, hermeneutics is the art and practice of deciphering meaning or message. The word itself is derived from the Greek god Hermes, a trickster deity who oversaw the mysterious middle realms of divine speech and revelation, doorways, crossroads, language itself, and the afterlife. Hermes was also a liar and a cattle thief, and he was worshiped in a simple form that commonly sported two features: a beard and an erection. Take note. The same god also gave us the words "Hermetic" and "Hermeticism," both referring to an ancient Egyptian-Greek stream of secret teachings about the deepest nature of the human mind and its identity with the cosmos.

The history and practice of hermeneutics encompass a vast range of figures, debates, and ideas.[42] Just two of these, both related to the figure of Hermes, will concern us here.

One is the key concept of secrecy or hiddenness. Hermeneutics is the art of interpretation that deciphers the hidden meanings of some enigmatic symbol, text, dream, vision, or striking coincidence. Freud was practicing just such a hermeneutics when he argued that the human mind censors itself and then indirectly expresses that which it has censored in the puns and symbols of dream and the slips of the tongue in everyday conversation (hence the famous "Freudian slip"); or when he argued that repressed and sublimated sexual desires drive a whole range of cultural, artistic, and

religious expressions (and now, I would add, much of American humor). Whitley's intuition that the figure of the female visitor had something profound to do with his conjugal relationship with Anne and his engagement with the symbolic message of the "nine knocks" phenomenon are both perfect examples of this kind of hermeneutics as speaker of secrets. Whether it's a Freud or a Strieber, the human Hermes encounters a code and reads it out with the "clicks" of a particular key. Unsurprisingly, but importantly, one of Whitley's most beautiful books is called *The Key*.

The other major idea of the hermeneutical tradition that will focus us here involves the strange loopiness of particularly profound acts of interpretation. Some interpretations are straightforward enough, of course. I see an octagonal red sign with the English letters "S," "T," "O," and "P" while I'm driving and know to press my foot down on the brake pedal. No enigmas here. But other kinds of interpretation do not work like this. Sometimes the hermeneut finds herself in a paradoxical "circle" or "loop" in which the reading transforms both the read and the reader. It is very much like the mind-bending understanding of quantum physics that Whitley keeps invoking: the one in which the act of observation really and truly changes the behavior and expression of the observed, which of course then changes the reality of the observer. Again, there is no stable "subject" looking at or interpreting a stable "object" in such moments. In hermeneutics, as in quantum physics, there is a single process that co-creates both the subject and the object *at the same time*.

No doubt the secrets of Hermes will confuse and frustrate you, as they do me. We are, after all, used to thinking of ourselves as independent subjects somehow contained in a body, not as secret codes to decipher or as living quantum experiments. So it is not your fault that you do not fully understand these hermeneutical paradoxes. Nor is it mine. Our confusions are a function of the fundamentally paradoxical ways that our very subjectivities are constituted: as cultural scripts, as texts written before us as us. It is confusing being a novel, a piece of fiction that considers itself a simple fact.

But let me make a simple observation that might give us all a bit of courage here: *nothing* I express under the rubric of hermeneutics is foreign to what Whitley Strieber has already written, and written in thousands of pages. I am simply making explicit what has been implicit all along in his

body of work. Consider lines like these: “There are theories of physics that suggest that perception may affect reality, and that we live inside a kind of envelope of meaning that confers structure on an indeterminate universe. It is as if everything is a sort of field before we perceive it, and that perception itself resolves it into the world we see and understand.”[43] *That* is hermeneutics, here expanded from the interpretation/activation of a text in an act of reading to the interpretation/activation of physical reality itself in an act of observation. This, by the way, is what I had in mind in the opening lines of this book, when I warned you that it is an apocalypse of thought waiting for you to activate it. Take note.

There is another way to explain this. Through movies. Filmmakers have engaged the same ideas, and often with much success. I am thinking of films like *The Never-Ending Story* (1984), *Stranger than Fiction* (2006), and *The Adjustment Bureau* (2011). Have you seen any of these films? Then you understand hermeneutics. In each case, the story revolves around a protagonist engaging his own life as a fictional story being written either in this world or in another, seemingly by someone else. As he reads and interprets the text of his life, however, he discovers that its story or plot changes. He discovers the circle or loop of hermeneutics. *He discovers that as he engages his cultural script as text creatively and critically he is rereading and rewriting himself*. He is changing the story.

The messages of such films are clear and profound ones. They tell us that we are writing our own stories, even as we are also being read by them (since we are born into stories that we did not write). They also tell us—and here is the real point—that it is time to take more responsibility for this world-writing, to claim our own imaginative powers. In the words of one of the members of the adjustment team that we hear at the very end of *The Adjustment Bureau*, spoken to us, the viewers, “Maybe one day we won’t write the plan; you will.”

The same hermeneutical insights are often voiced by Whitley in his books and in person. I once heard him at a private symposium speculate on how his visitor experiences were likely shaped by the “bad sci-fi movies” he had seen in such abundance as a kid in the 1950s. In other words, what he saw in the cabin on that terrible night may not have been what was actually there, but what his imagination had been trained to see.

Nevertheless, something *was* really there. And then the Hermes-like flip. "What we need to do now," he mused, "is make better sci-fi movies so that we can have better contact experiences." *That* is hermeneutics.

The Two-Way Mirror

The subject *and* object of the practice of Hermes is the human imagination, which works like a magic mirror. This is Nietzsche's "when you gaze long into an abyss the abyss also gazes into you," that Whitley Strieber moment when "the enigmatic presence of the human mind winks back from the dark." It is also, of course, this magic mirror–like structure of hermeneutics that makes it so trippy, so loopy, so hard to wrap our simple heads around.

In the terms of my previous chapter, we might think of the imagination as that mode of human knowing that intuits the unknowable "what is" and turns it into the knowable "what appears" so that a primate can make some sense out of that which its sensory system was not previously evolved to know or see, not at least on any regular, practical basis. That making sense of the unknowable through the appearances of the knowable—that is, through the imagination and its symbolic expressions—is what we call "interpretation." When the individual goes further and comes to recognize that these interpretations are both reflections of something real *and* human creations, that one is being interpreted as one interprets, being seen as one sees, then we call this paradoxical practice "hermeneutics."

I warned you.

Although never named as such, this is all at the very center of the abduction phenomenon. In 1988, not long after *Communion* appeared in January of 1987, Whitley wrote a most remarkable foreword for Jacque Vallee's *Dimensions: A Casebook of Alien Contact*. There he struggled on the page with the nature of his recent and still ongoing encounter experiences. What bothered him the most is the at once physical and not physical nature of the beings whom he was encountering. "And yet I myself have faced physical beings," he wrote. "The context of my own experience, with extensive witness by others, makes it clear that the phenomenon can emerge as an entirely real, physical presence that is quite capable of manipulating its environment." And yet, and yet: "The next moment,

though, it can evaporate into thin air, leaving not a trace of what was a moment before an immense and overwhelmingly real presence." He then dropped one of those amazing one-liners about the visitor experience. "I have even thought that it may simply be what the force of evolution looks like when it acts upon conscious creatures."[44]

I have never been able to shake off that line, as if it somehow wanted to be written about. So I will. I want to employ the line as a kind of prism to engage Whitley's invocation of "the imaginal" in the previous chapter. Recall that he was reflecting on the famous story of editor Bruce Lee running into two aliens paging through *Communion* in a New York bookstore in 1988 as they criticized this or that passage. The story is confirming, bizarre, unbelievable, and, significantly, I think, funny. Whitley adds another twist here, though. The upshot of *this* particular retelling is that the two aliens were two human beings seen in another guise, dimension, or mode. That is, this retelling is an exercise in considering "the possibility that humanity may have more than one form." It is in this context that Whitley then writes: "At that time, I was debating in my own mind whether or not the experience was 'real' or 'imaginal'—that is to say, a tangible presence somehow generated by the imagination."

By "real" I take it that he means "part of the physical, objective world that is socially confirmable," like, say, a chair that anyone can see (and sit on). But what does "a tangible presence somehow generated by the imagination" mean? I take it that he is implying that the two aliens would not have been seen *as such* by someone other than Bruce Lee, that is, that others in the same bookstore either (a) would not have seen them at all, or (b) would have perceived the pair as simply two human beings, since that is also what they were. But how can any of this happen? And does Whitley's invocation of that odd word "imaginal" help?

Whitley is not making up this word. It is thrown around quite a bit in the UFO literature, seldom, if ever, with an understanding of where it comes from or what it was first intended to express. Whitley's use of it here is quite faithful to the term's historical origins and original meanings, but both these origins and meanings need to be more fully explained so that the public conversation around the encounter experience can move forward and not keep stumbling over the same obstacles again and again.[45]

Debates about the imagination and its role in human knowledge go back in the West to ancient Greece around the secrets and enigmas of the revealed "symbol" and its relationship to the more plodding ways of reason and rational knowledge. The most recent chapter of that larger conversation goes back to the eighteenth century and what we now call the Romantic movement. The poets and philosophers of the latter asked: What is the imagination? Is it simply a spinner of fantasies? Or can it also become a "window" of revealed truths from some other deeper part of the soul or world? Or, better yet, like some secret two-way mirror in a modern-day police station, is the imagination *both*, depending on whether one is looking *at* or *through* its reflecting surface, that is, depending on which side of it one is standing? Can one stand on both sides?

When we give answers to such questions about the imagination, we are in effect proposing particular comparative practices. With the metaphor of the mirror, we are also proposing sight or the visual as the most adequate metaphor for spiritual knowledge (later, we will see that this is likely a mistake). For example, why do we encounter near-death experiences in numerous cultures but notice that these are normally painted in the mythical colors and populated by the personalities of the local folklore? A Buddhist child in Sri Lanka does not see Jesus on a white horse, but a boy from the American Midwest has. What is the same from culture to culture? And what is different? Or for that matter, why do some UFO encounters look like some near-death experiences in American culture? Any adequate answer to such comparative questions will involve some implicit or explicit theory about the imagination as a kind of two-way mirror that is reflecting back some things and seeing through others. The more explicit we can be here, the better.

I want to be explicit. I want to propose the idea that *a rare but real form of the imagination may be what the conscious force of evolution looks like*. And by "looks like," I mean two things: *how the evolutionary force appears* to a human mind in a particular culture; and, with a bit of a trippy twist now, *how the evolutionary force itself "sees*." I mean both sides of the two-way mirror. I mean both the *reflecting back* and the *seeing through*.

The first meaning of "how the evolutionary force appears" is, I take it, what Whitley had in mind when he wrote that line: "I have even thought that it may simply be what the force of evolution looks like when it acts

upon conscious creatures." The second meaning of "how the evolutionary force itself sees" shifts the conversation into new territory. That new territory involves the possibility that, in very special moments, the human imagination somehow becomes temporarily empowered or "zapped" and functions not as a simple spinner of fantasies (the imaginary) but as a very special organ of cognition *and* translation (the symbolic), as a kind of supersense that is perceiving some entirely different, probably nonhuman or superhuman order of reality but shaping that encounter into a virtual reality display in tune with the local culture: in short, a reflecting back and a seeing through *at the same time*.[46]

I cannot stress enough how important this question is to everything we are addressing here. I also cannot stress enough how damaging the inadequate models of the imagination have been to the public discussion. Take my two-way mirror analogy again. If you are working—consciously or unconsciously—with a model of the imagination as a mere projector of fantasy (if for you it is all reflecting back), then you will, then you *must* interpret the visions of the encounter experience as simple reflections of the visionary's own psyche and culture. You think that we are all standing before a simple mirror, and that there is no other side to the mirror, much less beings on the other side looking in at us. If, on the other hand, you are working with a model of the imagination as a perfect camera or recorder of what is (if for you there is no reflecting back), then you will, then you *must* interpret the visions of the encounter experience literally. You think that the contactee is standing on the see-through side of the two-way mirror, and that what he or she sees on the other side is what is really there.

I am suggesting that both sides of the mirror contain a piece of the truth but that each is incorrect if taken as the *only* perspective. I am also suggesting—and here is the really trippy part—that in extreme experiences like the contact or encounter experience both sides are in play at once. This double model allows us to appreciate "what appears" without naively taking it literally as "what is," but it also enables us to entertain the possibility that there is another side to the mirror, and that we can, as it were, see, and maybe even step, through it.

Whitley, I would argue, has been working with just such a model of the imagination all along. His whole paradoxical notion of "communion" is

about this same trippy idea of imagining a presence that is imagining us. Hence his eerie image of the visitor as an ancient prehistoric coelacanth suddenly appearing in our nets the moment we ourselves are willing and ready to *observe* it. This is no ordinary fish, of course. We, he suggests, may be working hard to create the visitors, even as they may be working hard to create us: "Truly, such an act of mutual insight and courage would be communion."

That is the mind-bend of hermeneutics. *That* is the two-way mirror of the imagination. If we are ever going to understand something like the contact experience, we will have to come to terms with both.

The Imaginal

There is a history of reflecting on this communion in the two-way mirror of the imagination. Much of it is bound up in the "imaginal." Some think this expression goes back to the French scholar of Islamic mysticism, Henry Corbin, which is partly true. Some think it goes back to C. G. Jung, which is partly true as well. Corbin borrowed it from Jung, who in turn borrowed it from a Swiss psychiatrist by the name of Theodore Flournoy, who used it in his classic study of the Swiss medium and visionary Catherine Elise Müller, *From India to the Planet Mars* (1900). This particular book (written over a century ago) actually bears directly on the later alien-abduction literature for its careful engagement with supernormal or paranormal phenomena, for its invocation of Mars, and for Flournoy's use of a particular psychological tool to catalyze and access Müller's "romances" or stories: hypnosis.[47] But Flournoy himself did not coin the term either.

The word "imaginal" was first brought into broad use in the early 1880s by the Cambridge University teacher of Latin and Greek, education reformer, and Victorian psychical researcher Frederic Myers (1843–1901). There were no movies yet. But there were lots of telegraph wires (and there would soon be telephones). Behind the imaginal, then, lay another new word inspired by this newfangled technology: "telepathy," which Myers coined in 1882. He intended to express through this new word the fact that most dramatic psychical communications occur between loved ones within

extreme emotional states, often in dangerous or deadly contexts. Hence his new Greek derived word, *tele-pathos*—"pathos at a distance."

Myers and his colleagues struggled at first to come to terms with the extraordinary stories that they heard in such numbers (they systematically collected and analyzed thousands of them). At first, they used the patently paradoxical expression "veridical hallucination" (if you haven't noticed, paradox is everywhere when one ventures into these realms). The expression was meant to capture the simple fact that in the cases they were collecting the individuals know perfectly well that they are imagining, dreaming, or seeing a "hallucination," but they also know that the dream or vision is "veridical," that is, that it corresponds closely to something actually happening in historical and physical reality. In my own terms, they were perfectly aware of both the "reflecting back" and the "seeing through" of the two-way mirror.

But "veridical hallucination" was an awkward phrase, and Myers was a poet. He had to come up with something better. He noticed that telepathic communications were often accompanied by altered states of energy, or what he called (probably after the great Swedish clairvoyant Emanuel Swedenborg) an "influx" of spiritual energy. He began to speculate that these altered states of energy somehow fundamentally change how the imagination works. In our own terms, he began to speculate that such energies could "flip" the two-way mirror around so that the reflections in the mirror could suddenly become visionary displays of something that really existed on the other side. This, he believed, was how the imagination would someday normally function in the far future: as both.

He described these future human capacities as "supernormal." We have already encountered this word above in our discussion of how the paranormal came to be. The supernormal appeared just before the paranormal. Now I can tell you more. Supernormal meant "further along on the evolutionary spectrum." It meant natural but highly evolved. Myers thought that in telepathic communications and precognitive dreams we are witnessing the early signs or buds of a still-evolving future super nature—ours. He meant the super natural.

It was this superevolved form of the imagination that Myers dubbed "imaginal," and he defined it this way: "A word used of characteristics belonging to the perfect insect or *imago*;—and thus opposed to *larval*;—

metaphorically applied to transcendental faculties shown in rudiment in ordinary life."[48] The definition is an awkward one, but it is directly and eerily relevant to Whitley's visions. So let me explain it.

Myers was thinking of entomology, the study of insects, when he defined the term. In entomology, an imago is the final adult form of an insect's metamorphosis. This final stage is also sometimes called the imaginal stage, whereas the insect's immature feeding form is called the larval stage. The larval stage of an insect, of course, generally looks nothing like its adult form or imaginal stage, although the latter develops from the former. Myers was also working in an era that commonly held, after the German comparative anatomist, defender of Darwin, and evolutionary mystic Ernst Haeckel (1834–1919), that the development of an organism "recapitulates" or repeats its deep evolutionary history: Haeckel's famous "ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny." It was probably this same understanding of an organism's individual developmental history as a reliving (here extended into a preliving) of the species' deeper evolutionary history that Myers was invoking with his new coinage of the imaginal.

He even told a humorous parable about some "humble larvae" dissecting each other as they argue about their destinies and real natures. Everything about their wormy forms looks like it was made for the cabbage leaf. And yet they also appear to possess budding or potential features that look like they might be adapted to the air. One brave caterpillar points this out, but the rest don't believe him. How silly. How ridiculous. Then, suddenly, a butterfly lands on the cabbage leaf. The brave caterpillar points out all of the features on the beautiful winged being that look like advanced developments of their own squishy bodies. The butterfly then flies away.

"This," Myers explains, "is exactly what I hold to have happened in the history of human evolution."[49] The imagination is now evolving into the imaginal. We are about to fly. The wormy munching stage of the larval will someday evolve into the perfect insect of the imaginal.

Wild Talents and Wild Visions

There are at least two different modes of the imaginal, which correspond to the two sides of the two-way mirror analogy (and it is only a rough analogy). There is what we might call the *empirical imaginal*, and there is what we might call the *symbolic imaginal*. Following and expanding upon Charles Fort, let us call the first a "wild talent" and the second a "wild vision." Whitley has known both.

The empirical imaginal, or wild talent, names those moments when the dream or waking vision corresponds closely (but not always exactly) to an event in the objective world. Myers's early "veridical hallucination" falls into this category: the visionary knows, instantly and firmly, that a loved one is in danger or has just died. Often, even the mode of death is known and described in the vision or dream. Here the human imagination is, in a word, "clairvoyant." It seems to work like a camera *and* a video projector: it somehow "sees" and then projects what is happening at some distance along the space-time continuum within a mini-movie in the mind of the visionary. Little or no interpretation is needed in this type of imaginal event. The visionary often knows instantly what the vision is about. The vision is about what it says it is about. Finally, note that there need be only one world or order of being in play here. There is no invocation of an "otherworld" or another side of the mirror. The action all takes place in this one.

Obviously, such clairvoyant capacities, if cultivated and realized, would bring very real and very practical survival benefits. This is why Fort called them "wild talents." They were *talents* because of their potential pragmatic usefulness; they were *wild* because they generally manifest only spontaneously, and we have not yet cultivated and integrated them into our lives and cultures. As he himself put it: "By a wild talent I mean something that comes and goes, and is under no control, but that may be caught and trained."[50]

And what talents these would be! The simplest of thought experiments can show how even a little precognition or clairvoyance could make a warrior nearly invincible or a hunting party astonishingly successful. And, indeed, we find various divinatory practices around military and hunting activities throughout the historical and anthropological records. For a modern western case that demonstrates especially well the survival utility

of clairvoyant abilities, consider this case as told by G. N. M. Tyrrell in his classic little study, *Apparitions* (1953):

> *The percipient in this case, a child of ten, was walking along a country lane near her home, reading a book on geometry. Quite suddenly her surroundings faded away and she saw her mother lying on the floor of a disused room in her home, known as the White Room, apparently dead; and beside her lay a lace-bordered handkerchief. So real was the vision that instead of going home she went straight to the house of the doctor and took him home with her. There they found the child's mother, lying on the floor of the White Room (an unlikely place for her to be), suffering from a bad heart attack, and the handkerchief seen in the vision lay beside her. The doctor was just in time to save her life.*[51]

The symbolic imaginal, or wild vision, works very differently. Here the dream or waking vision is experienced as mediating some other world or metaphysical truth. Whitley's visions mostly fall into this camp. Here the content of the dream or vision can be quite baroque and bizarre. The sense is that these images and narratives are functioning as ciphers of some other form of mind, some other dimension of the real, or—in Whitley's previous chapter—some other form of our shared humanity. Here the human imagination is not so much clairvoyant as it is an organ of revelation: it is *not* clearly seeing and projecting in any one-to-one fashion. Rather, the imagination is intuiting or sensing something Other or Alien and then translating, mediating, or picturing what it has known to a human psyche, but always in code. Hence interpretation is necessary. Note that there are at least two worlds or dimensions at play here.

I must add that we cannot treat these two forms of the imaginal as mutually exclusive. Wild talents and wild visions clearly overlap and are probably functions of some deeper human capacity still, perhaps consciousness itself (whatever *that* is). As is often noted in cases of robust precognition, for example, the visionary often misses this or that detail of the event. It is as if the projective imagination is filling in details that the transmission or telepathic cognition does not supply, much, I should add, as

we see in ordinary sensory processing. As has been noted in the neuroscientific literature, the "movies" we see in dreams and in everyday sensory awareness are not entirely different, and everyday sensory consciousness can be thought of as a kind of dream that is constantly controlled and guided by sensory input from the external environment.

The same exact mixture of wild talent and wild vision can be seen in Whitley's accounts. For example, in his early encounter experiences, he meets what appear to be blue trolls and slender bald aliens, but he also sees an old friend, who, he later learns, has recently died. So Whitley's experience mixed or fused the symbolic (the trolls in overalls and the almond-eyed visitors) and the empirical (the recently deceased friend). The wild talent was the wild vision was the wild talent.

I am not simply being "academic" here. Complexities aside, these new categories and careful distinctions give us a great deal. They shift our conversation. Consider the following.

First, with these new ways of speaking and thinking we can now be *more precise*, because we can distinguish between two very different types of imaginal functions: those that are seeing empirically and those that are seeing symbolically.

Second, we can also be *more generous* because we can now recognize the necessity and importance of the most baroque or fantastic imagery, that is, of the wild vision, without falling into naive belief or a too quick dismissal.

Third, we can also be *more open* to what the visions are trying to say. For example, we need not now shy away from visionary phenomena that are bizarre or strange simply because they appear absurd or outrageous to our rational egos and ordinary sensory experiences. Indeed, we might well expect with our new notion of the symbolic imaginal that this absurdity is a necessary function of the translation across the border or threshold between two radically different forms of mind and being. How else is the farmer going to talk to the pig, or the library owner to the cat?

Fourth, we can be *more suspicious*. Maybe the farmer doesn't want to communicate too much to the pig. Maybe the being on the other side of the two-way mirror doesn't want to say too much to the being on this side. Isn't that what a two-way mirror is for in our own social world, *to hide* the

viewer from the viewed, *to prevent* a direct and unencumbered two-way viewing?

Still, having said all of that, I do not want to make too much of this basic distinction. I want to emphasize the two-way nature of the mirror. Here is a single comparative example of why. As I was finishing my chapters for this book, I was attending a conference at the Esalen Institute and sharing a room with my colleague and friend Adam Crabtree, a gifted psychotherapist and historian of mesmerism, multiple personalities, and trance.

One morning, Adam awoke and began to chat, quite out of the blue, about a recent troubling encounter he had experienced during a kind of sleep paralysis episode, a fairly common state for him during which he is aware of (and can see) his room and can feel his body but cannot move it, except for his eyes. Adam proceeded to describe hearing knocks on the ceiling or slanted roof (which happens to be just above his bed) and becoming aware of two malevolent "hypnagogic visitors," working in tandem. One, whom he could not see, pressed up tight against his back with its arm around his neck. The other, whom he could see, was a short athletic "repulsive" creature who appeared "like a man with slouchy work clothes and a rumpled overcoat on, all a kind of dusty light brown color." This one jumped with catlike movements, silently landing on his hands and feet on the floor before he vaulted up onto Adam and straddled him, pushing his fingers down on his body and touching his penis lightly through the blanket. It was at this point that Adam gathered the "sheer determination" to move his body, and the scene instantly disappeared.

This caught my ear, of course, since it sounded like he was describing Whitley's experience. Actually, it sounded exactly like Whitley's experience. I asked him how many knocks there were. "Three," he answered immediately.

Well, shit.

So were Whitley and Adam separately "imagining" the same things? Is there some module or code in our brains for "ugly short troll in overalls" and "three knocks on the roof"? That seems unlikely. Or are there actual invisible trolls in overalls who mess with us while we sleep and like to knock three times on our shingles? That seems unlikely. Are we in the

realm of the symbolic vision or the clairvoyant vision here? Wild vision or wild talent?

I am always reminded here of the alien that appeared to Nebraska law officer Herbert Schirmer many decades ago. The alien is said to have left the good law officer with this piece of paradoxical, and funny, advice: "We want you to believe in us, but not too much."[52] That, it seems to me, is wise counsel for those of us who venture into the wild talents and wild visions of the imaginal realm. Believe them, if you must, but not too much. And keep a smile and a chuckle about you.

The Telepathic Insect of the Future Human

There is something else about Myers and the imaginal, something fundamentally uncanny, something at once strange and familiar. This strange familiarity ties directly into Whitley's writings. It involves the evolutionary force again and "how it looks."

The alien in the visions of Whitley and countless other abductee accounts is often described as insectoid in form. These haunting figures are frequently compared with an immense praying mantis or a human-sized insect. They communicate with humans telepathically. The immense almond-shaped eyes are compared with those of bugs. And the visionaries repeat again and again their intuited sense that what they saw was *us* coming back from the future.

The modern abduction visions thus replicate, in precise and eerie detail, the thought of Frederic Myers: the same perfect insectoid form (Myers's imaginal stage), the same telepathic powers (Myers coined the term), the same implicit call to become active participants in our own evolutionary advance (Myers's sense of the supernormal as the superevolved and the imaginal as our future form). Whitley's books are also filled with this call to join the universe, to expand our vision's scale to its cosmic scale, and to "commune" with the evolutionary impulse of all there is.[53] What was a metaphor and a parable in Myers's system over a century ago has become a literal visionary form in the contemporary scene. The larval stage of the human being has morphed into the adult stage of the

imaginal, which appears to the present human mind as a super-insect calling us to the further reaches of human evolution with the exact super natural power that Myers himself first named: telepathy.

How do we explain such precise resonances between this Victorian psychical researcher and our contemporary abduction literature? Did Myers himself, like my imagined Charles Fort, have some sort of proto-abduction experience or insectoid vision? We will never know. What we do know is that imaginal visions are still with us. Like Myers's beautiful butterfly, these perfect insects have taken flight off the cabbage leaf before our wormy eyes, this time in a glowing machine that we call, with much too narrow a vision, a UFO.

8

Pain

WHITLEY

On that night in December 1985, the most essentially and powerfully feminine presence I have ever known came to me and had me dragged out of the house and essentially beaten until I realized that she was real and I was not dreaming. During those horrific moments, I awoke both physically and spiritually.

I know now that she had been trying for some time to awaken me. I have understood that we exist, in our normal state, in a sort of sleep that filters out certain aspects of reality. For whatever reason, we simply do not want to see this. Throughout the previous autumn, she had been using her droll and sinister coterie of trolls to approach me. My reaction was to buy alarm systems and guns, and stalk the halls of our little country cabin, sick with a nameless fear.

One of the first things that became clear in the days following was the feeling of being carried. There was a sense of surrender involved that was one of the most deeply relieving and yet terrifying perceptions I've ever had.

We are wild animals. We have tamed others to us, but nobody has ever tamed us. On that night, I began a process of education that started at the

most basic level. I was being broken as I used to break horses when I was a boy, on the rollicking ranches of South Texas. In fact, every summer when we returned to our country place in the Texas hill country, our horses, which had been left to roam all winter, required a bit of breaking.

You ride them until they're too tired to buck, basically. You do it again and again, until the instinct to throw off anything on their back finally subsides. Then the horse, terrified at first, full of viciousness and hatred, will gradually become gentled, will take food from your hand, and in the quiet way of horses, take pleasure in your companionship. Your horse will be glad to see you, whom he once hated, and will fill his nose with your scent, which he at first rejected with an angry snort.

On the night in question, my immediate conscious response was one of confusion mixed with fear, but on a deeper level something quite different was happening. Feelings emerged in me that I had not been aware of before, that could best be described as a sense of surrender to a greater power that carried with it both terrific fear and what I would describe as a sort of pleasure found in spiritual release, the giving of oneself to something higher. This was accompanied by a pleasure that was unlike anything I had ever known. It was physical. It was spiritual. It drew me to drop barriers I had not known were there, and from that to experience a new kind of nakedness, that made me feel at once vulnerable and delighted. My soul was naked.

This was not the third great sexual experience, but its prelude. Preparation for contact.

The combination of pleasure and helplessness was devastating. Delicious agony. The result of this was a short story, which I began writing at that time. It is called "Pain." In it, the narrator comes into contact with a young woman who turns out to be a sort of angel, very sweet but also very determined to free him from the dark things he has done in his life by balancing their karma with pain. The narrator is put into a box in which he experiences great agony, which is described as fire, but which is actually the anguish of facing one's own truth. When he is released, he is deeply free, not so much of any real evil he has done, but of the guilt that was weighing on his soul. His fear was not of what was there, but of what he was afraid was there, and this, I think, is why most of us resist looking into ourselves.

As I was writing the story, the memories of that night came back to me, and a sequence appeared in it connecting it to alien lore, the first time in my work that this had been directly addressed. There were, on that first night, many different levels of experience, all unfolding at once. Confusion, amazement, and terror were on the immediate surface, of course. But beneath them there was something quite different. I've struggled with it, attempting to bring words to a subtle feeling that had an enormous emotional consequence.

Not since my life was wrapped in the amnesia of childhood had I been carried. On this night, though, I was, and while this was happening, I was completely helpless. The combination of dread and sensuality was almost impossible to bear. They could not mix, but they did. They had to. As I lay in that dreamlike but intense state of struggle, I came to feel a sense of being under control of a sort that I had never before known. Worse, it felt like a sort of relief, being under such a spell. This horrified me, but worse, thrilled me. I suppose that the horse, at the moment of breaking, feels something similar. It is when fear surrenders, and the acceptance that will eventually turn to love emerges—when the animal perceives that no harm is intended, and that compliance brings rewards.

At first, it was like being trapped, perhaps, by a bear. It seemed as if brute force, empty of meaning, had gained control over my body. Meaningless suffering would be followed by meaningless death. But then the groaning dark blue trolls were joined by what at first appeared to be gigantic hornets. They had the affect, though, of young women. I sensed in them the purity of maidens, and in the days after, they emerged as the character "Janet" in my story. I chose the name carefully. It's feminine, but with a distinct edge. This is how I described her: "She wore a fresh-looking blue frock. Her hair was golden brown and conventionally waved. Her face was soft, the face of a girl, with inviting, delicate lips, a straight nose and eyes softly rimmed by big lashes, framed by arching brows. It was a completely winning face, as pure a face as I have ever seen."

And again: "Her eyes were light green and were the only thing in her face that suggested anything more than sock hops and torrid backseats. It was not that they were dazed or shadowed or cruel—not at all. They were the eyes of a surpassingly intelligent person—bright and quick and full of life. More than that they were kind eyes. Looking into them, one sensed a

true place of rest." I had changed the eyes from brown to green because otherwise it would have been eerily familiar as a description of Anne.

While the creatures I remember had big black insect eyes and a menacingly alien demeanor, when they appeared in my imagination rather than my memory, I saw them as my emotions had seen them, behind the curtain of fear.

Great and terrible Oz turned out to be a young woman, possessed of the kindness that is present in good people who are loved for their beauty.

One night about six weeks after the event, I experienced, in an anguish of conflict and disgust, a very surprising feeling of desire. I was still working on "Pain." In the night, images of Janet became entangled with images of the visitors, their innocence and their great power, and I began to feel waves of desire as I remembered their hands upon my naked body. "Their" became "her." I squirmed with need. I begged her to return.

I wanted to be once again naked in those sweet arms, genuinely helpless and being penetrated in my soul if not my body. The supposed rape, which had so challenged both my sense of propriety and my sense of self, now returned on the wings of desire.

This plunged me into turmoil. I came to feel that the experience had been so powerful that it had given rise in me to what I then regarded as perverted desires. Even though the urgency was compelling, I could never fulfill a need to be dominated. How? Go to some sex club? The whole idea was creepy. In any case, I had no intention of engaging in sexual activities outside of my marriage. Years before, I had decided that Anne was right for me and enough for me, and I took a vow to be faithful to her, and that was an end to it.

Or was it? This period was when I began walking deep into the woods behind our cabin at night, carrying only a flashlight. Admittedly, it had twelve batteries and probably could have started a campfire if I'd needed it to, but it was still just a flashlight. I went really deep, a mile or two back into the forest. This wasn't only to confront my fears, it was also a richly sensual experience. On those walks, my body came alive in ways that I had not known to be possible, as fear and desire melted into one another. Every breath, every movement, the smell of the air, the feel of it, caressed me in a newly vivid way. Familiar, too, from that long-ago childhood night.

I assume that, in some way, my nocturnal excursions did indeed attract the attention of the visitors, because they started to show up again in my life, beginning the journey that I remain on to this day.

When I say "show up again," I want to be very specific. I am dealing here with more than one kind of perceptual memory, and I want to do a careful job of differentiation. It has taken me many years of work to be able to do this. For example, when I wrote books like *Communion, Transformation,* and the others, I was not able to, as it were, taste the difference between a memory that refers to a concrete event and one that refers to an intense event that might not have been so concrete.

This is because the intensity of the more ambiguous memories was often so overwhelming that I simply could not focus my mind clearly enough to tell that they had this important textual difference.

Having worked with them now for years, I can do this, I think, fairly reliably. With this in mind, I am now going to describe four events, all of which, at least in part, seem to me to be memories of physical experiences. This does *not* mean that the perceptions I am going to describe are precisely what happened, but they are what I was able to perceive, or chose to perceive. In Jeff's language, please "make the cut" when reading what follows.

I reported the first of these in some detail in my book *Transformation*, and this one I recall in exactly the same way that I recall a physical experience. It was about midnight, and I was sitting in a chair in our cabin when there suddenly came on the side of the house or the roof, nine knocks in three groups of three, followed by what seemed like a sort of resigned double tap, which I perceived as a reaction to the fact that I had remained frozen in the chair and not, say, stepped outside.

These were not normal sounds. They were absolutely, startlingly perfect, as if the time between them was precise to a measure we do not normally perceive. They were also high up on the house, a good sixty feet from the ground, so it wasn't somebody in the backyard.

Both of our cats were in the room with me, and they reacted by turning into great puffed-up balls of fur and moving along on their stomachs yowling. So they were hearing something, too.

As this was happening, I had the impression that the dark blue trolls—the kobolds—were involved.

The nine knocks had great significance to me. One meditative practice that Joe Stein had used involved contemplating nine thoughts in three groups of three, and I had been using it for years. Also, when entering the thirty-third degree, a Mason must knock on the door of the lodge nine times in three groups of three. This is because three triads traditionally form a triad themselves, a completion. Reaching the thirty-third degree represents the completion of one phase of one's life as a Mason, and so also on that night, I was being told that I had completed one level of study and was ready to enter another.

I was much too scared to go outside at that moment, and the two double taps seemed to express disappointment that I hadn't done so. But, like my initial entry into the school, this moment was about going to a new level of conflict. I was failing and succeeding at the same time. The mandala was turning. It was, in other words, a living experience that has left me with a living question: What if I had gone out? Would "they" have focused in a new way? Would I have met aliens, or had some deeper secret revealed? One very deep truth is that this was now the second time I had refused the call. The second crow of the cock, as it were. The first came when I struggled and fought on the first night. Instead of opening my mind to what was happening, and addressing it like a human being, with questions, I reacted with the wild animal's fear.

Maybe I made the right choice and maybe I didn't. By refusing the call, I sent a message that I wasn't ready to graduate from the school, not yet.

Now, looking back, this and the next refusal of the call that I will discuss shortly remind me of the way in which my early acceptance into the school of this experience was at one and the same time a rejection. I'm reminded of Anne Sexton's "awful rowing toward God." That's what this is, an awful rowing, but toward God or not, I do not know. An awful rowing toward the living darkness.

After I published *Transformation*, I got a letter from a reader in Glenrock, Wyoming, who said that the entire town had experienced the nine knocks on a very strange night in which there had been odd lights and small figures dashing in the streets. Anne and I went to the town, and I have no reason to think that any of the people we discussed this with were lying.

The next experience I will describe is one that I have, in the past, only alluded to. It was the most intense experience in a lifetime of intense experiences, a sexual experience so beyond anything I had ever known that I am left to this day to wonder at the powers hidden in the body. I will try to recount this transcendent, agonizing, and glorious experience as exactly and dispassionately as possible.

It starts abruptly, and seems to be factual memory, but so strange and unexpected that it also has the flavor of dream.

I woke up abruptly. To my surprise, I found myself in our guest room, not upstairs with Anne. A second later, I realized that I was aflame with desire. I wanted Anne, but she wasn't there. Instead, I was lying naked on my back and sexually excited. Sitting on top of me was the woman from the cover of the book. She was slim and soft and angular. Even though her face was blacked out as if by some sort of curtain, this is who I believed it was.

A fire went through me like no fire I have ever known before or since. When she shifted slightly, I arched my back, I screamed out my guts, abandoned to the pleasure of it, scalded by it, consumed by it.

When she was finally still, I lay gasping, still in her, still burning.

But then I noticed that standing at the foot of the bed was a group of people. One was a man in a military uniform, whom I recognized. (And therein lies one of the most fantastic stories in this whole narrative, which I will relate momentarily.) Beside him was a short blond individual who I would meet again some years later in the woods, and who would, in 1994, follow us to Texas when we left the cabin and moved there. Beside him was another man in civilian clothes. I think there were two other people as well. They all looked upset and embarrassed.

So here I was, this very private, very conservative man, in the most fantastically revealing situation I could imagine, and in addition, being watched by people who were disturbed, even disgusted, by what they were seeing. For a moment, I was embarrassed, but then she moved again and again the pleasure set me on fire. I can remember grabbing my temples and screaming, then weeping, and seeing these people turning away.

Then it started, the rhythmic flow of it, fire in me, burning up and down my spine, cleansing me, finally annihilating me. I was only pleasure, the body and the fire of the body.

It was a transformative nakedness. Lying there like that, I experienced total surrender and profound sexual satisfaction. I did not know that such absolute surrender could exist, let alone that it would open every secret door to pleasure in my body. And yet, as disturbing as it was, it was also gratifying. It seemed *needed.* I found myself glad to have been chosen for something that, although violent and exploitative, had about it a fiery holiness that I will never forget.

The event ended in ejaculation, a delicious, joyous agony, wrenchingly pure. I lay spent, vibrant with release. All was still for a moment, then she lifted off me and at once I became aware that they were leaving. They moved quickly. I heard their voices out in the living room, a nervous discussion.

Exactly what happened after that I do not know. The next thing I knew, I was in my wife's arms, lying there in brilliant ecstasy.

Thus ended the third experience. The fourth would not equal it in intensity, but would be an act of such surpassing intimacy that to recall it even now makes me uneasy. I am not given to such acts, and it left me feeling even more unfaithful and ashamed. But that was for later. Just now, I found myself waking up in bed.

The sun was hard and bright pouring in through the windows, and all seemed normal and well. I was, however, so ashamed that I couldn't look at my wife. I felt that I had doubly cheated her. I had broken my marriage vow, Worse, I had just loved it.

Or had I? What really happened on that night? I feel as if I made love to somebody, but who? An alien? A succubus? Some part of myself that normally lives so deep that I am not in touch with it? Perhaps something that, put simply, cannot be known, not given the level of information we now possess about what we really are.

But recently, there was a shocking codicil that made the event seem more concrete. It had happened in 1987 or 1988, and for all of those years I have wondered if the man I thought I recognized there had any idea of it.

In late December of 2014, Anne and I were having dinner with some new friends. He is a filmmaker who was raised in Romania during the communist years. When he was twelve, he had a close encounter that he has never been able to remember, with the exception that he was given a book, a detective story. It was innocuous, except for one thing: one sentence was

underlined twice in heavy lines. The sentence read “Colonel ‘X’ promised that he would never reveal what he saw on that night.”

The name is that of the military man whom I recognized, who witnessed the event in the cabin. He is involved in secret intelligence, and has also been a friend for many, many years. Now I wonder what he really knows, what he has seen, and what memories he plans to take to his grave. If I had made a promise like that, I would never, ever break it, Never, and I would never challenge him in the matter. Still, I think that my suspicions have been confirmed. I suspect that something extraordinary did happen that night, and that he was witness to it. As dreamlike—even imaginary—as it now seems, I suspect that there was a sexual encounter on that night, and I am haunted as to why. Always, the whisper of suspicion is there: do I have a child, or children, in some other reality?

Coming as it has nearly thirty years after the events, and when I was actually in the process of writing this chapter, I am left in silence while contemplating the possibilities.

Back then, it took me some time, but I finally told Anne what had happened. I expected her to be hurt, even furious. Even though I hadn’t intended it, I had broken my vow to her. To me, this was deeply shameful. Anne, however, took it in stride. As I have said, I was—and am—left wondering if she did not somehow share the experience.

A couple of years later, one of the people who had been in that room turned up living in the woods behind our house. Or was it the same person? It could be that my mind inserted him into the memory of the earlier experience after I saw him. It is so very important not to forget things like this. While memory is more a plastic than a fluid, it is not an absolute record of the past, but a complex, ambiguous way that the brain and mind have of adding the dimension of the past to life experience. So, despite this apparently concretizing discovery, this memory, like all memory, must remain in question. I will say this, though: the man who began living in our woods in 1992 was incredibly strange, and quite real.

But that’s for later in the narrative. Now, it was the summer of 1988. This was the period when other people were beginning to encounter the visitors at our cabin. I had grown concerned for our little boy, and had sent him off to summer camp, hoping that he wouldn’t become involved any more than he already was. I’d also told the parents of his friends that people

in the area were reporting these odd apparitions, and that they were coming into our house, but nobody seemed in the least concerned. I was concerned, though. Very concerned.

Then it came: the fourth great experience.

One night I woke up sensing a presence in the room. It was not visible, but it was really awesome. It was also feminine, and I recognized it—her—at once.

It is hard to remember surrounding details, but I think that after a moment I did see her. She was sitting in a chair at the foot of our bed, her form visible in the leaf-dappled moonlight that was coming in the window. I only remember a shadowy presence, and an odd sense of freshness and youth contrasting with another impression I had gained at some point, that this person was very old.

The next thing I remember is that I was kneeling in front of the chair. Her hands came onto my head like tendrils of smoke, the hands of a ghost, but they were paradoxically strong and pressed me toward her lap. She opened her legs and I saw a darkness within. Not entire darkness, though. There was a glow there, too. She drew my head gently down.

My sexual life with my wife had been very satisfying, but not very adventurous. We'd been happy with it, anyway. And now, since December of 1985, this new sort of experience had entered our lives—primarily mine. I had endured anal penetration while helpless, which, while it angered me, also triggered a primal sense of acceptance that was, as it turned out, taming. Then I'd had a sexual experience that was more intense than anything I had even known was possible, and done that in a room full of people, one of whom I had recognized, another of whom would return to my life in a few years in a half-mad state.

I felt the hands drawing me forward, saw her legs spread, saw the glow seeping out from between the legs. But what glow? What was this? Human beings do not glow in their private parts.

Then I was doing something that I had never done before. My head was being held from behind and my face pressed against her. Now, close, there was a scent, pungent like forest muck, sweet and sour like a woman, richly alive, awful and wonderful.

I found myself drawn into the loveliest, sweetest kiss I had until that time known, touching my lips to the lips of that vagina. The liquid there

was both delicious and disturbing. I reacted to it as if I was receiving a gift. It opened my heart, returning me to my first kiss, with a long forgotten girl a long time ago. The sensation was one of being absolutely cherished and absolutely favored. I wonder if even Hephaistos would have had so intense an experience of the *mouni* of Aphrodite.

I wanted it to go on, but those soft hands soon pushed me away. For a moment, they held my face, and then I found myself alone. I sat on the floor staring at the empty chair. Then I stood up and returned it to its normal place at the little desk that was in our bedroom.

I went into the bathroom and washed myself. I now felt disgust and violation uneasily mixed with regret and loss. Looking into the mirror, I saw a haggard face. A wave of loneliness overtook me. I wanted to cry. Then I turned toward our bed, and saw there another shadow, my wife sleeping in beloved innocence. I lay down with her, and gloried in the sigh of sleepy pleasure I heard when I drew close to her.

The next day, I wondered what on earth had happened. Had I actually had another exotic encounter? What was this sense that she was so very, very holy, truly a sacred being?

I couldn't tell Anne, not something this strange. I simply didn't know how. I couldn't tell anybody, and haven't until writing these words. Even after all these years, putting this down on paper is extremely difficult for me. Without going further, I will say that these experiences revolutionized our sex life. We rediscovered ourselves in a new way. What a deep holiness it was—she was—to teach me as she did, and bring to my marriage the wonders I had found.

It was not all joyous, though. As always, the dark side of the sacred was there, too. During this same period, something quite terrible happened. It wasn't unfamiliar to us, though. We'd read about it in thousands of letters. It was, in fact, a commonplace occurrence of the close encounter experience.

In the backs of both my and Anne's minds had been the wish for another child. I would dearly have loved to have a daughter. Anne just wanted another baby. We weren't really trying for another pregnancy, but if one had come along, we would have been thrilled.

Then came an awful night. It began with a dream. In it, I saw a lovely young woman walking away along a path in a charming wood. Sunlight

dappled the ground. Flowers overflowed along the borders of the path. As the young woman waved good-bye to me, I woke up. I was astonished to find myself in tears. But why? How could a dream overpower me like that?

Sooner or later, I went back to sleep, only to wake up again, or half wake up, because I thought that one of the cats had jumped onto our bed. We were at the cabin, but the cats were back in Manhattan in our apartment. As I realized this, my eyes flew open. I saw, standing on the foot of the bed, three of the dark blue kobolds. Their faces were horrific almost beyond description. Lorie Barnes's cry of "you're so ugly" hardly even begins to describe what I was seeing. Their eyes were sharklike and preternaturally sharp, as if they were looking not at me but *into* me. Their lips were red and lascivious, grotesquely sexualized. One of them actually licked its lips, as if it was about to enjoy a meal. These were predators, there was no question in my mind about it, and they were after us.

I jumped out of bed and they were instantly gone. Also, I was now fully awake. Had "they" actually been there? How could anything that looked like that even exist? Surely terrors like that don't walk the world, except the world of nightmare.

Later still, Anne woke up. She was in agony. She was bleeding. She rushed into the bathroom and proceeded to have a miscarriage. Blood poured out of her, but no debris. I got ready to take her up to the emergency room, which was about thirty miles away, but the bleeding stopped and she decided that she wanted to rest at home instead. She told me that she had been pregnant, but had been saving the news as a surprise for me.

We cried and cried that night, lying in each other's arms, in the great dark. I kept the horror that I had witnessed to myself, and held Anne and cherished her and prayed that she be protected and loved, and her sorrow pass from her.

Perhaps a year later, once again at the cabin, we were going off to a restaurant for dinner. As we descended into the garage, I noticed what appeared to be an opening in its concrete floor, a round darkness. Anne didn't see it, so I said nothing. By that time, I was well aware that I would often see things that others did not.

The next thing I knew, I was holding a lovely little baby who regarded me with dark, frighteningly conscious eyes. Then, seemingly with nothing in between, we were driving to the restaurant. All the way there, we talked

of nothing but babies, but our youth had slipped away, and there would not be another infant in our lives.

That did not mean, however, that infancy was entirely behind me. The next winter, I would revisit that state in a most surprising way.

I was still trying to engage with my "visitors" in some manner that would enable me to finally strip away all of the artifacts of imagination and dream and see them as they actually were, in the flesh and in common light. I was still naive enough to imagine that such a thing could happen, and still wanted to believe—hoped to believe—that I was dealing in some straightforward way with aliens. But this next experience would in a most elegant manner enlarge the question of what they were and are, by offering me an experience of the very highest strangeness and deepest ambiguity, mixing as it did clearly physical elements with others that we would consider completely impossible.

It would be the third and final refusal of the call. I did not understand at the time, but after this, my relationship with them would never be the same. I would still be a student, but left to my own devices, no longer able to rely on them for instruction. What I needed now, I would have to find within myself, and take my questions to them.

The first refusal had been the active side of the triad: I had fought and screamed like a wild animal. The second had been passive. I sat in my chair until they gave up. The third would be reconciling: from it, I would gain basic insight about what I was, where I was, and why I was here.

It was February. I had been going down into the woods nightly and meditating in the cold and winter silence, in the hard-frozen, glowing snow. I was returning to the spot from which I had been taken in the first place. I was asking for a meeting, dropping deep into meditation and making the request with my mind, heart, and body. On one of those nights when the clouds were rushing and the wind was sighing in the pines, I had seen a dark circular shadow above me, hanging just inside the cloud cover and as still as a stone. I watched the clouds tumble past it. I marveled at how absolutely motionless it was. And I visualized sitting on a little stone bench I'd built nearby, sitting with her, and talking together about the secrets of space and time.

Early one morning, just at the edge of dawn, there came from those woods the sound of a trumpet or shofar, three haunting, mournful wails.

I interpreted this as a signal. I was to go down in the woods. I was to sit on the bench. I leaped out of bed, grabbed my winter robe, put on my thick, fur-lined slippers, and headed for the door. I went out across our deck, then down the familiar path that led to the stone circle where I meditated. The bench was just beyond it. But as I walked, I saw in the clearing beyond the winter-naked woods, a dark, ovoid shadow that should not have been there. Shadowy figures, short and stocky, seemed to be standing near it.

I paused. I saw that this was an extraordinary opportunity, certainly the opportunity of a lifetime.

No sooner had those rather self-involved thoughts passed through my mind than I heard a voice say, "Come on, come on." It was hard and mean, and had about it the flavor of somebody growing impatient, who was hoping to spring a trap.

I thought of my wife and son asleep back in the cabin, of what it would be like for them if I disappeared. I remembered the monstrosities on the bed and the other events of that tragic night.

I could not take this risk. I had a family, and their welfare came first. I couldn't just disappear on them. I was in that moment incredibly torn. I wanted to continue on. I dared not. I had to. I must not. Finally, my heart filled with fear and swamped with regret, I turned around and went back to the house.

The moment I put my hand on the doorknob, I heard the richest, strangest, and most beautiful sound I had ever known, or, I believe, will ever know. It was neither a human nor an animal sound, but it had elements of both. Astonishingly, there was also a strong sense of the mechanical.

It came in the form of three cries, so perfectly spaced and precisely uttered that, by comparison afterward, even the most superbly executed music had to my ear a muddy, slapdash quality for many months. This exquisite precision was a repeat of the nine knocks experience.

It was also, by a tremendous long shot, the most emotionally rich and complex sound I have ever known. Everything about it was tremendous: the gentleness, the ferocity, the love, the longing, the disappointment.

I was confused and badly frightened. I ran back upstairs, wanting to protect Anne from what I feared might be some sort of very overt incursion,

even an attack. After all, the first thing I had heard was that awful voice snarling impatiently.

Somebody came with me, and I knew who it was. She was invisible, but nevertheless absolutely and undeniably there. I was once again in the presence of the goddess of my heart, my beloved and terrible friend.

I could not see her, but I could certainly feel her. Beloved, dangerous presence, an invisible tiger and an invisible saint. There was a sense of the empty menace of the cruising shark and a love richer than any I had ever known or would ever know again.

I remembered the penetration of my body on December 26, 1985, the fiery consummation that had taken place in the guest room, and the other intimacies.

That all flashed through my mind in an instant. My heart exploded then with the most poignant sense of love and the greatest sense of danger that I have ever known. I saw our daughter walking away, I saw Anne weeping her anguish on that bloody night, I felt the strange baby in my arms.

Then I was somewhere else. I saw tall, spindly wooden spires around me and for a moment couldn't understand at all. Where was I? What had just happened? And why was I gliding like this? To my amazement, I recognized a nearby piece of furniture. It was my mother's desk that had stood in her bedroom back in the late forties when I was a baby.

The spires were chair legs and the legs of the desk. I was a baby again, and the wonderful gliding sensation was me walking.

I had been taken back to the beginning, to an incredibly vivid visual memory of my earliest, first steps. Once again, there was great complexity in what had just happened. I was being told that I had taken a first step. I was also being told that I was still a baby.

In the years that have followed, I have agonized many times over that final refusal of the call. Something very sacred had approached me and I had drawn back, too afraid to surrender myself to its dangerous embrace.

I must say that in all the beauty and all the darkness, the sweetness and ferocity—all of its contradictory, profoundly honest manifestation—the being that I had been having this love affair with—for that's what it was—was a holy person. Be it man or woman, part of me or Anne or some deeper, richer intimacy within the beloved labyrinth of my marriage, be it alien,

human, or a nameless thing that wanders the world in search of love, I was briefly privileged to gain its notice and fall into its embrace.

It has given me so much—she has—but did she also take my daughter? If so, then to what end? I sense that my child is out there somewhere, perhaps living a superconscious life, or did she die in abnegation, fodder for some cosmic predator? Or is it that we are all both things?

Because I was led to reconciliation of the wisdom and the horror, I am grateful beyond saying to this my dear teacher, at whose knee I learned greater truths, and glimpsed the world as a far more complex, intense, and richly alive place than we are in our general life graced to know.

I recall that the author of one of the letters that Anne had brought to my attention wrote that, when she found herself face-to-face with one of these great-eyed beings, to all appearances the strangest thing she had ever seen, she found herself blurting out, "Teacher! How good to see you again."

Teachers, but bringing lessons harder than any ordinary teacher could ever bring. G. I. Gurdjieff taught the importance of friction, and manufactured it in the lives of his students. What I got from the visitors was friction a thousand times more potent, friction that had the power to break the soul, to plunge me into a frozen paroxysm of hatred and fear. But it didn't happen that way. I am still here, still learning, and will be until death takes me and, I am sure, beyond.

To be taught truly is to be guided inward, into the secrets of one's own heart, and at once to be lifted into a greater vision. "Greater" does not mean more beautiful, though. It means truer, which is, as far as I am concerned, more exquisite in its ambiguity.

Looking back over my life, I can see many different ways of embracing the experiences I have described. I could focus on the agonizing loss of our baby and say that it was stolen by aliens. I could say that we were later shown this baby and claim further that this means that it was kidnapped and raised by them.

I could say as easily that I fell in love with some sort of monster and had grand sex with it, and never mind those unfortunate looks. I could also say that this whole group of memories causes me to look at myself and the world around me in ways that otherwise would not have been possible, that open my mind and heart to the richness of questions that I can neither bear

to leave unanswered nor truthfully answer. The corrosive power of these questions demands that I close them, but I will not close them, not until I can sit across a table from my dangerous and sacred mistress and converse clearly and openly with her about them. Even then, I doubt very much that she (he, it, or unclassifiable) would betray me by closing them in my face.

In the end, the questions that I bear and carry regarding these possible events are the most energetic intellectual and emotional resources that I possess. They draw me along one twisting forest path after another, into reflective caves and floral meadows, then again down ways so dark that I dare not pass. But I do pass. I always go down the forbidding path, into the trackless cave, across the desert that has no end, on the waters of the storm.

I don't do these things because I am especially curious or especially foolhardy. I do them because I can. These questions that burn within me, that wake me sweating in the night, are the treasures of my soul, the keys to the kingdom.

But what kingdom? Am I a seeker on the heaven road, or lost, doomed to wander the darkness forever?

I have no idea.

9

Super Sexualities

JEFF

On the night of December 26, 1985, the most essentially and powerfully feminine presence I have ever known came to me and had me dragged out of the house and essentially beaten until I realized that she was real and I was not dreaming. During those horrific moments, I awoke both physically and spiritually.

What was Whitley Strieber's crime? What did he do that was so wrong, that merited so much shaming and condemnation on the part of the literary elite and the religious powers that be? And, yet, why did his story resonate so powerfully with millions of readers and come to indelibly mark, perhaps even shape, a new, emergent mythology well outside the reach of the cultural and religious gatekeepers? I think the answers to these two questions are related.

Put most simply, he was too honest. Put more complexly, he followed the cardinal rule of psychoanalysis, which is to speak exactly what appears in one's experience without self-censorship or concern about what others might think. He has also traced much of his visionary life back to his dream-life, his childhood, and his sexuality—all classic psychoanalytic themes. In psychoanalysis, of course, this is all done in the professional confidence of the analysis: the secrets are shared by just two people with

the presumption that speaking secrets is ultimately healing. Shockingly, Whitley did the same in broad daylight in the glare of the public page: the secrets were now shared, potentially at least, with anyone. And he was not writing fiction. He was writing about his own all too real encounters, about his realization "that she was real and I was not dreaming." As in psychoanalysis, I think he did this to help us heal our public culture, mired in a materialism so deep that it can only be haunted by the numinous.

But there was something else, something fundamentally religious about these publicly spoken secrets. Not only did he speak his secrets in public, but he also spoke reverently and fearfully of a divine presence that was *feminine*, that broke and rode him like a horse, an erotic presence into which he disappeared in waves of terror and pleasure so overwhelming that they literally washed away his personality. Nor did he leave this divine feminine being in the abstract in some distant heaven or speculative past. He related the presence again and again to flesh-and-blood women with whom he had very real relationships: first and foremost his wife, here his mother, and even his unborn daughter. By so doing, he spoke of a presence at the very heart of the unconscious of the religious West, a presence that has been repressed and denied for three millennia. He spoke of Her.

Erotics

Comparison. *Phenomenology*. *History*. *Hermeneutics*. Scholars of religion have another practice for thinking about religious phenomena across great stretches of space and time. That practice is sex. Well, okay, it's not actually sex. It's thinking and talking about human sexuality, gender, and sexual orientation in more and more precise ways. Let us give this entire complex of modern thought and practice a new name. Let us call it *erotics,* as in the expressions "physics" and "optics."

Erotics, as we shall see, is a very big word. It encompasses everything from the microchemistry, biology, and neurology of sexual arousal, through the immeasurable stretches of time (and countless sexual acts) of evolutionary history, to the socially shaped natures of sexual desire and gender identity, to the sublimation, or "making sublime," of erotic energies into thought, art, and civilization, even, if we are to believe the reports, into

the highest flights of mystical ecstasy and metaphysical vision. Erotics, finally, is also deeply related to another topic to which we will arrive soon enough: the *energetics* of the soul.

If you consider it for a moment, this focus on human sexuality makes good sense on the humblest and simplest of levels, since every human being who has ever lived on the planet has had a body like ours, really almost *exactly* like ours. We can thus use our bodies to understand one another across cultures and times. We may not speak the same languages, and we certainly hold different beliefs and values and even, no doubt, differently nuanced sexual desires and genders. But we were all conceived in a sexual act (at least until very recently with the new fertility technology). We were all "born of a woman." And we all have experienced sexual desire, if, yes, in incredibly different ways.

But the scope of erotics hardly stops there, with our shared bodies and physiologies. Its invisible lightning cracks and arcs from the lowest reaches of human cruelty, violence, and aggression into the highest reaches of the human spirit. It is a bit like nuclear energy: it can be used to power a city, or melt one.

I am hardly the first to suggest this. Two and a half millennia ago the Greek philosopher Plato argued much the same through his writings on what the Greeks called "eros." Eros for Plato was not some simple reproductive instinct. It was the secret driving force of reproduction, for sure, but it was also the secret driving force of (male-to-male) education, of culture, and of the arts. And, most important of all, it was also the secret driving force of the search for wisdom and divine vision. Indeed, if eros could be redirected from the "vulgar" objects of heterosexual reproduction and the "heavenly" objects of homoerotic desire, it could become "winged" for ecstatic flight and take the eroticized philosopher into the highest realms of the cosmos. Freud, in the last century, would pick up on Plato and pursue the nitty-gritty specifics of how human sexual energy, which he called "libido," morphs through the human life cycle and body (from the entire body, to the mouth, to the anus, to, eventually, the adult genitals) in specific family constellations. He also showed us, again, how this energy can be sublimated into various cultural works of art, literature, and religion.

Scholars of religion are seldom this Platonic or this Freudian, but the fact remains: we employ the categories of sexuality, gender, and sexual

orientation to think about religious phenomena and religious institutions all the time. We do this for one simple reason: it works. Whenever, for example, one is looking at extreme religious experiences, the sexual elements are probably not far behind. Sometimes they have been repressed or censored, or sublimated almost beyond recognition, but they are usually there, burning in the background, like a halo glowing on a saint or a flame dancing on the tip of a demon's tail.

All of this, though, begs a single question: What is sex?

No, I mean really, what *is* it? This, I think, is the deeper question that Whitley is getting at through the imaginal prism of the Alien Who May Have Been Anne. I think Anne was central to all of this: as Whitley's lifelong intellectual partner, as his co-writer, as his co-researcher, but also as his wife and lover. I do not think we can underestimate her importance or her presence in what Whitley has hymned over the years as his central dream and vision of "communion."

And this brings us back to the question: What *is* human sexuality? We tend, of course, to think of sexuality as *not* us, as some kind of dark and dumb "instinct" that forces us to reproduce, to "have sex," as we say. What a silly phrase. What is it, exactly, that one "has" when one engages in sexual activity or momentarily disappears in orgasm?

We also generally assume that sex as such has nothing essential to do with the astonishing zipping and unzipping architecture of the spiraling DNA molecule or the mind-boggling complexities of the cell, trillions of which make up, in near perfect concert, each of our gigantic human forms (from the perspective of each and every one of those trillions of living cells, each of us is *immense*). We never imagine sex "writing" these genetic codes in any conscious or creative way. Quite the contrary, we are asked by conventional science to think of all of this as ultimately meaningless, without any goal or purpose, and certainly without any conscious intention or internal intelligence or agency.

But what if this picture is incomplete? What if what we so naively call "sex" is not some dumb instinct but a conscious cosmic energy in its own right that is super-intelligent, that "wrote" us through our DNA and now "co-writes" us through our cultural and spiritual practices, including these reading and writing practices that we are engaged in together *right now*? What if *this,* too, is "sex"? And what if we are being asked to form some

conscious relationship with this conscious cosmic energy so that we can, in effect, co-evolve ourselves through these same sexual acts and sublimated cultural and spiritual practices?

This is a modern translation of what Plato was getting at when he called eros a god and identified it as the secret energy of our lusts, of our cultural productions, of our divine visions, of philosophy itself. In any case, this is what I have in mind when I refer to the study of sexuality and religious experience as a developing *erotics*. All of this in turn bears on the questions of Whitley Strieber, of *Communion*, and of all that followed that dark and beautiful book. *This* is "communion."

Forbidden Fruit, Forbidden Knowledge

Most human cultures before our own have understood sexuality as sacred, that is to say, they experienced a terrifying and terrific divinity in it. Many traditional cultures went even further and saw it as a means to deify the human being. Believe it or not, this is the case for the founding biblical myth of Western monotheism, the story of Adam and Eve in the garden.

Go back and read it. The story clearly links the two forbidden trees—the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, and the Tree of Life—within a single narrative. Eating from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil produces immediate sexual shame, and so the young couple covers their genitals after tasting it. The same "eating" or "knowing" (a biblical euphemism for "having sex") also invokes a set of punishments that fit the crime, in true biblical style. So Eve will suffer in childbirth, which is the direct result of the original "crime," and Adam will have to toil in the fields, "plowing," "seed," and "soil" being what they were in ancient agriculture—heavily sexualized metaphors in the male imagination.

The fruit of the Tree of Life is not sex. It is deification. If the couple eats of this fruit, they will become gods. The couple, of course, is banished from the garden for their sexual disobedience before they can eat of the second tree, but the story stands: sexuality and divinization are the two (forbidden) trees of our original mythical home.

As the story suggests, we have not dealt very well with either fruit. We imagine a petty, mean god that stands against our most natural biological

urges and highest spiritual aspirations. We are morally tortured by our sexual desires and broken gender relations (all that Adam lording it over Eve), and we have hardly begun to struggle with our potential deification.

Yet.

The garden myth is just a piece of the historical puzzle, of course. If we broaden our historical visions (that is, our historical context), we can easily see that human beings have been experiencing themselves as the sexual objects of gods, goddesses, and other discarnate beings for a *very* long time. Witness the "sons of God" taking human wives to produce hybrid heroes just a few chapters later in Genesis 6. Witness the sexual nature of the djinn of Islamic folklore. Witness the nineteenth-century American Spiritualists engaging spirits erotically and, in the process, imagining entirely new gender and sexual relations. Witness the British lore around intense sexual emotions temporarily "lifting the veil" between this world and the other. We could go on here for literally hundreds of pages, and we would not come to the end of examples.[54] The history of religions is a history of strange sex.

The Divine Feminine

There is a basic problem here, though. It is so simple and so obvious that it is not always recognized as such, not at least in its full scope. Until, that is, someone like Whitley pulls it up from the cultural unconscious and has it painted in bold colors on a best-selling book cover.

The problem is this: in the monotheistic West, the divine can only be imagined as male. Exceptions aside, at the end of the day God is a He, a Father, a Lord, a King, a male Creator without a divine partner or a wife. There is God, but no Goddess. There is some good evidence that the biblical God once had a spouse, a Goddess, as it were, but She was long ago banished from memory and proper belief.

There are many devastating moral and spiritual consequences to this history and this basic gender grammar. The most obvious, and rightly most commented on, is that women are effectively erased from religious history and denied positions of authority and power in the religious institutions of

the monotheistic West, since—or so the logic goes—their genders prevent them from representing and speaking for (the male) God. My colleague April DeConick calls this ancient pattern "holy misogyny."[55] By this phrase, she means to point out that this basic disregard for women is not something tangential to the biblical traditions. It is something fundamental to them. It goes very, very deep. This problem, of course, has been noticed and has become a central feature of the feminist study of religion, which is one of the richest and most developed voices of the field. These voices have even been heard by many a religious community that has taken the results of the scholarship here to heart.

Another consequence of the all-male gender grammar that is seldom commented on is that it results in a spiritual world in which human males have no "Her" with whom to commune, much less with whom to unite erotically and lovingly. There is *only* a "He." This is why Jesus asked his closest male disciples not be married and to "castrate" themselves for the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 19:12): apparently, he wanted them to reject (hetero)sexuality and take on a feminized relationship to the divine. This is why Paul wanted all of his disciples, male and female alike, to become "virgins" for Christ and marry the god-man (2 Corinthians 11:2). This is why the two iconic female figures of Roman Catholicism have been the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene, that is, a lifelong virgin and the patroness of celibacy (read: no heterosexuality) and a repentant prostitute (read: no heterosexuality anymore). This is why some of the greatest saints of the Catholic tradition were called "bridal mystics." They had—man and woman, alike—wed the god-man, become his spouses. Put in contemporary terms, a kind of spiritual or sublimated "gay marriage" was *the norm* among male Christian mystics for centuries.[56] This is why male heterosexuality—bodily and spiritually oriented, of course, around the desire for and love of real women—has long been either compromised as a second-choice thing of "this world" or entirely secularized as something purely physical.

There were historical exceptions, of course. I am thinking of traditions like the medieval Movement of the Free Spirit, who were known (or said to be known) for any number of spiritual and sexual excesses, including ritual nudity, the practice of free love, and the attempted sublimation of orgasm into mystical ecstasy, and who spoke, at least according to the heresy

records, of sexual intercourse as "the joy of Paradise."[57] I am also thinking of more modern figures, like William Blake, the Romantic poet-painter who drew angels caressing immense phalli and a holy chapel in and as a woman's vagina. Or the French paleontologist and priest Teilhard de Chardin, who saw the evolution of the cosmos as a divine incarnation spread out over billions of years and dreamed of a day that Christian couples could encounter a God of love within their heterosexual intercourse.

But these astonishing ideas were all effectively marginalized or repressed. Hence my humorous memory of the kind monk who once told me how they sold Teilhard's books in the Catholic seminary bookstore in the 1960s and early '70s. Since these books were all incredibly popular but also frowned upon by Rome (they could not be published during the priest's life), the monks hid them under the counter and handed them over to eager readers in brown paper bags—exactly like (heterosexual) pornography was sold at the time in drugstores. That's what a spiritualized heterosexuality or sexually active evolutionary mysticism is in a monotheistic world: pornography, heresy, impossible.

I have written three books about what is going on here, but the basic point is this. In the context of a religion like Christianity in which God is male, any erotic relationship with this God for men will be, by definition, homoerotic in structure. I am not suggesting anything genital or even conscious here, nor am I passing any moral judgment. Actually, I think "being holy" and "being gay" are fundamentally related phenomena within the tradition: gay people have spiritual gifts that straight people do not. If anything, then, I am simply jealous.

But most of all I am trying to point out why any male heterosexual encounter with a feminine presence in a Christian culture will be framed as heretical and will be at best ignored and at worst demonized and persecuted. It will be *alien*. This is Whitley's real crime and the deeper reason that *Communion* was so vehemently rejected by fundamentalist Christians. He was offering what is essentially a feminine divine and a male heterosexual spirituality, neither of which can fit into the gender grammar of the monotheistic West.

One can "castrate" oneself for the kingdom of heaven, as Jesus wanted us to do. Or one can become a "virgin for Christ," as Paul wanted us to be. One can even "date Jesus," as young Evangelical women do. But a man can never ever erotically commune with Her.[58] He can *never* lie in the lap of a goddess.

The Flip

Go ahead and track the uses of "communion" in *Communion*. You will see that, in almost every case, this communion signals some profound emotional connection to another human being, and that human being is usually Anne. For whatever else or more it may be, Whitley's "communion" is fundamentally about human emotion and a married, procreative heterosexuality. It is about a profound cosmic love between a man and a woman.

This is even more obvious when Whitley begins to wonder if he was really cheating on Anne when he had sex with the alien goddess figure. The following passage is key to my argument, and so it is worth repeating here:

> *One way to put it would be to say that I had a love affair with a goddess. Another would be that it was an affair with an alien. But the third way to describe it—which is, I suspect, closer to the truth—is that I don't know who or what my wife really was, or myself, or any of us. I don't know what human beings are, and, based on my own life experience, I have every reason to suspect that the form we live in every day is not our only state.*

As I read him, Whitley is not saying in this passage that the goddess and the alien are "nothing but" human sexual instincts. He is not reducing the spiritual to the sexual, as, say, Freud might. Rather, he is saying that there is something fundamentally "divine" or "alien" about human sexuality itself. He is not reducing the gods and goddesses to sex. He is raising sex to the gods and goddesses. He is "flipping" the whole thing around.

This strikes me as exactly right. It is certainly what I have been trying to say for twenty years now. I call these expressions of human sexuality "super sexualities." By such a phrase I do not mean to suggest that Whitley and Anne's sexualities are or were somehow better than ours, somehow "super" in relationship to our "not so super." I mean to suggest that *there is something super about sexuality itself*. I mean to suggest that, in rare but real moments, human sexuality can "flip over," "reverse itself," or "turn inside out" and thus be revealed as something uncanny, something that earlier cultures identified as "supernatural" but we might just as well recognize, with a single careful pause, as "super natural." *That's* the flip.

Sexuality, of course, is not just connected to our most intimate loves. It is also connected to our most violent cruelties, our most severe repressions, and our worst fears. Little wonder, then, that the monster and the demon often show up in our sexual lives.

Consider, as a single eccentric case, the Mothman of Point Pleasant, West Virginia. Here was a red-eyed, seven-foot winged monster who displayed a disturbing preference for terrifying menstruating women and whose multiple spectral manifestations in 1967 were accompanied by numerous UFO encounters. The latter UFO phenomenon, John Keel notes in his famous book on the Mothman, "displays an almost pornographic preoccupation with our mating practices."[59] Indeed, one of his chapters begins with two lovers, stripped to the buff in a parked car enjoying each other, until a humming blue ball of fire parked outside their squeaking, bouncing car. The blazing blue ball seemed conscious, as it backed away a bit when the woman saw it and screamed. And then it disappeared. The young couple threw on their clothes and immediately drove back into town only to discover that they had lost two full hours.

"I knew that UFOs often zero in on lovers in parked cars," Keel explains. He also knew that many men and women who have encountered these things often find their marriages on the rocks, "after they begin their liaisons with the space people." So Whitley's pained concerns about the possible conjugal effects of his erotic occult encounters were hardly unreasonable ones. They fit into a much larger pattern.

I would put all of this in the form of a rhetorical question: Is there something cosmic about human sexuality, something at once erotic and

daimonic, something that can only reveal itself to us in spectral forms, like humming blue balls of conscious fire, UFOs, winged monsters, and almond-eyed sci-fi goddesses?

It's not really a question. I think so.

Sex, Death, and the Sacred

Whether we are dealing with canonized Catholic saints or an American monster folklore, one thing is obvious enough in these accounts: sex is not just sex. Sex is "divine." Sex is a "demon." Sex is dangerous. Sex is a glowing blue ball of light. Or a giant man-bat. Or a feminine presence that drags a professional writer out of his comfortable life and beats him into a spiritual awakening.

The dark side is important. We should not look away. Why? Because it is one of the faces of the same presence or power. This is as true on a religious or mythical level as it is on a biological one. Sex, after all, is the biological flipside of death. "This ancient human experience," Whitley writes in the last chapter, "not only rends the veil between the living and the dead, it penetrates deeply into sexuality." There is a reason for this. There is sex only because there is death. If there were no death, there would be no need for sexuality. Sex and death are two sides of the same biological coin, and we are that flipping coin.

Such truths are difficult for many to understand, partly because of our religious heritages, which are not always very helpful here. Some of these traditions, and particularly the Catholic tradition into which both Whitley and I were born, have too often implied or openly claimed that the sexual and the spiritual are opposing forces, that sex must be left behind, renounced, or denied for the life of the spirit. Part of this, again, is a function of the male same-sex structure of Catholicism: what is really being rejected here is (hetero)sexuality, that is, sexual desire *for a woman*. Hence Jesus's call to castrate ourselves for the kingdom. Another part of the reasoning here, though, is built on an ancient "hydraulics" metaphor that saw the human body as an upright channel of sexual-spiritual fluids and forces. Allow those fluid forces to flow out "down there" and they would not go "up." Seems simple enough.

But it's not. Such an either-or logic is built upon and indeed relies on a deeper identity between the spiritual and the sexual. One suppresses the sexual to get to the spiritual not because these two movements are completely different, *but because deeper down they are the same*. Sex and spirit are two ends of the same human spectrum (and the same spine). They are not really opposed. They are part of the same living system—us.

There is something else to say in this context. It involves Rudolf Otto's notion of the numinous again. Otto, you might recall, was thinking of "the holy" or "the sacred," by which he did not mean "the good" or "the ethical." He meant to refer to an experienced force or power in the environment that might be positive or negative, or both at the same time. The sacred captures the very ancient sensibility that that which is holy or sacred manifests in two different ways: in a positive, "right-handed," beneficent way, and in a negative, "left-handed," sinister way.

To see or touch God in the Hebrew Bible does not lead to warm fuzzy feelings or ethical social behavior. It *kills* you. God in this ancient sense is not a nice person, much less someone to date. God is a fierce and powerful presence that is alluring and beautiful but also terrifying and deadly. God is awe-full. When Whitley muses about how he is still "haunted by the paradoxical sweetness of many of these ferocious experiences," he is giving voice to exactly this ancient sensibility around the sacred. So, too, was a writer like the great Irish poet W. B. Yeats (1865–1939), who took this name when he was initiated into a magical society: *Demon Est Deus Inversus*. The Demon Is God Reversed. As in a mirror?

This is all incredibly important for any remotely adequate understanding of encounter experiences, since it allows us to embrace both the positive and the negative experiences, and—and this is the real point—to see these seeming opposites as two ends of the same spectral phenomena, or as reversed mirror images of each other. We no longer need to deny one for the other. We can ponder both the aching beauty of Whitley's raptures and the violent and invasive nature of his rape. It is time to come to terms with *all* of it. It is time to stare into the mirror and step through. It is time to shift the conversation around sexuality, too.

Correspondences

I was once lecturing on the topic of super sexualities at a liberal arts college in the Northeast. The lecture included six sex scenes, four of which are relevant here. One involved a nirvana-experience of a young Protestant woman (Jenny Wade) disappearing in an ocean of pure Light during a sexual encounter; one involved a sexually aggressive female dolphin that beamed, from her forehead, a kind of DVD-download of billions of years of evolution into a stunned secret agent in a swimming tank; one involved a Houston businessman getting his brain "rewired" by a conscious ball of energy that floated just above his head and experiencing an erection that lasted for ten days; and one involved Whitley's initial visitor experience. A student asked me afterward how I determined which of these stories are true. Behind his polite question I detected another edgier one: Why believe any of these outrageous tales at all?

That is a fair question, but it has a simple answer. That answer involves the fact that I have been in such a super sexual state myself. Because of this, I often recognize, immediately, the details and nuances of that remembered state in the reports of others. I accept the reports I accept because I recognize my own experience in them. I know that my own state really happened, so why doubt the reports of others when they were structured like my own, often down to tiny weird details? Put differently, I look for correspondences and energetic resonances. I *compare*.

Such a method is not perfect, of course. I may be wrong in this or that case. I am certain I am, actually, although I do not have any way of knowing when and where. Still, this comparison through personal resonance or correspondence seems reliable enough in the long run. Moreover, is not this the same method of those who reject such states? Do individuals not reject the authenticity of this or that fantastic state because they can find nothing in their own experiences with which to compare it? *Everyone* compares. *Everyone* finds, or does not find, resonances and correspondences.

In the opening lines of chapter 4, I explained that I had numerous professional reasons and one deeply personal reason for taking Whitley Strieber seriously. We have up to this point looked at the professional

reasons: *comparison*, *phenomenology*, *history*, *hermeneutics*, and *erotics*. Now we arrive at the deeply personal one.

The correspondences started with a painting and a book cover. Like so many of the hundreds of thousands of readers Whitley and Anne heard from after *Communion* hit the bookstores, I recognized the face on the cover. It was those eyes. I had seen them before. Actually, I had seen them many times, *countless* times.

Those large almond-shaped eyes are iconic in the esoteric religious tradition to which I gave my first academic love and attentions: Bengali Shakta Tantra. Remarkably similar eyes can be seen on thousands of Hindu goddesses throughout India, but they are especially prominent, and particularly obvious, on the goddess Kali within the Tantric subcultures of West Bengal in northeastern India, where I lived and worked during the school year of 1989–90 as I researched my dissertation and first book on the "empowered" (*shakta*) Hindu saint Ramakrishna (1836–1886). Shakta Tantra is an esoteric tradition that emphasizes the erotic conscious energies (*shakti*) of the goddess Kali and the ways that these energies can be awakened in the human body through the right yogic or sexual techniques, or through the touch of an awakened and empowered Tantric teacher.

It was not just those eyes, though. I immediately recognized in Whitley's accounts of his erotic encounter experiences in books like *Communion* and *Transformation* what I had known and felt during "that Night," as I came to call those few minutes in Calcutta, in the fall of 1989 during the annual Kali Puja festival, when my own mind and body were similarly electrified and, presumably, changed by Her *shakti*. Toward a demonstration of these energetic resonances, allow me to set, side by side, the details of that Night with a single scene in Whitley's book *Transformation*.

Here Whitley describes how after his initial visitor encounters he sought to deepen the contact and "communion." Toward this end, he had taken up a particular practice recommended by the out-of-body researcher and technician Robert Monroe: "mind awake/body asleep." This simple description, at least, is very familiar to the folklorist and the reader of mystical literature as a consciously cultivated form of sleep paralysis, a physiological condition in which the body is indeed asleep or paralyzed but

the mind is on-line and, often, engaged in elaborate visionary displays of (or encounters with) discarnate beings.

Whitley put himself in such a state in order to leave his body. Almost immediately, he witnessed a vision of the "long, gray hand of a visitor pointing at a box." Such an abstract vision had a most unusual and surprising effect on him. It caused "an explosive sexual reaction" in his body: "My whole body was jolted by what I can only describe as a blast of pure sexual feeling." This erotic blast in turn "seemed to loosen connections inside me. I rolled out of my body. It felt as if I had come unstuck from myself." He now found himself floating above his bed and body. A number of visions followed, including one of what he thinks was an electromagnetic field around some electric wires outside. Such experiences and visions in turn lead him to speculate over the next few pages about an "electric body," "more energetic levels of being," and of the independent existence of the soul as "an energetic form that is in no direct way sustained by the brain/body system."[60]

So what do we have here? We have a mind-awake/body-asleep state that results in an incredible blast of supersexual energies, which in turn catalyze an out-of-body experience and some subsequent ideas about the electromagnetic nature of the human soul outside the body/brain.

Now here is what happened to me twenty-six years ago. It was early November. I had been participating in Kali Puja, a multiday cycle of festivities and rituals celebrating the goddess in her fiercest and, in some more esoteric traditions, most erotic forms. Somewhere in the middle of the celebration, I "woke up asleep" one morning, that is, I found myself to be conscious and awake but also physically paralyzed. I could not move. Looking back, I would say that I was in some sort of trance state, very similar to what the nineteenth-century French mesmerists described as *lucidité* (lucidity) or *sommeil magnetique* (magnetic sleep).

"Magnetic sleep" seems exactly right, particularly if we add "electro-" to "magnetic." As I puzzled over my odd condition, I felt some eerie presence enter the room, or emerge from some other occult dimension, or come out of my own body (I have no idea which it was). It began to arouse me sexually. This is a fantastic understatement. My first thought was that I was being electrocuted. Was there some kind of weird electrical

malfunction in the wall near my bed? My second thought was that I was having a heart attack.[61] But I didn't die. It continued to work on me. I am tempted to invoke a subtle physics here, or the mythical languages of radiation and mutation. Whatever they were, these energies were *alive*. They knew what they were doing, and I was the object of their power and intention.

Or their prey.

As this presence did whatever it did to me (the unprintable f-word would be entirely appropriate), the aroused state I was in became more and more intense. It felt as if the energies were reaching down into every single cell of my body, or—if this is even possible—into every subatomic particle, each of which seemed to be humming at an unbelievable frequency. "Frequency," "energy," "vibration," "resonance," "magnetic"—these are not mesmerist, Spiritualist, contactee, or New Age metaphors to be mocked by some arrogant intellectual who has never known such altered states of mind and energy and so has no idea what he or she is talking about.[62] These are near perfect descriptions of what I was really and truly experiencing, *what I had become*.

There were other more fleshly effects, too. I had a serious erection. I was also watching phalli appear and disappear in a kind of surreal dreamscape. I wanted to come. But, on some deep, unspoken level, I assumed—no doubt from my years of reading both psychoanalytic theory on sublimation and South Asian Tantric literature on the redirection of sexual energies from the genitals into the cranial cavity—that, if I came, the fantastic states that I was experiencing would go away. I thought that it was a matter of either "going out" or "going in." I intuitively held my breath (breath and energy are linked in Tantric yoga) and "went in."

The conscious electricity responded with what I can only describe as an ecstatic implosion. It felt like I was being sucked into some kind of invisible portal or black hole that paradoxically went "in" to go "out." It was as if a cosmic orgasm suddenly turned inside-out or outside-in (such three-dimensional metaphors are useless here). I was now being helplessly pulled out of my body by some powerful, invisible "magnet." I felt and saw myself floating to the ceiling of the room. Now I was really scared.

I am not claiming any kind of literal levitation, although that may have been the case. I really have no idea what an external observer would have seen (or not seen) in that room on that Night. I am simply describing what I experienced. I am describing, as best I can, *the phenomena*—what I sensed, knew, and "saw" with my temporarily electrified imagination.

I do not have any idea what happened next. I vaguely remember a gap at this point, although I do not know if that is correct or a function of my later reading of the pattern of "lost time" in the UFO literature. All I really remember is struggling back into my bed or biological body in a most ridiculous fashion. As my feet still seemed to float above me, I grabbed the bedstead and pulled myself back down onto the bed and/or into my body. It was silly, but it worked. I woke up with what felt like a buzzing body, as if some kind of weird electromagnetic gnosis had been transmitted into me. I wrote my first three books directly out of that whatever-it-was and have spent most of the last decade or so trying to convince my professional colleagues that mind has something to do with a superconscious energy that is not produced by the brain but is more likely filtered through, reduced by, and transmitted through its neurological circuitry and cultural software.

The correspondences between these two stories are precise and obvious: awake/sleep state, supersexual implosion, out-of-body experience, and a subsequent conviction in an independent electromagnetic soul or cosmic mind.

Whitley's description in this book of "being with an invisible tiger or an invisible saint" (the double sacred) perfectly describes what I knew on that Night, tigers and saints being what they are: oh so common in West Bengal. Actually, I may have actually *been* with an invisible saint, the one I was studying at the time with such devotion and intensity. Ramakrishna was famous for "zapping" his disciples with a hand or a foot while he was alive, exactly like this. My own experience even has a well-established name in Tantric culture: *shakti-pat*, literally, a "descent of Power." The notion of *shakti* carries the sense of an energy, at once palpably physical and spiritual, that is transmitted, like an electric current, from a spiritual master to a disciple. There is also a rich tradition of receiving such a transmission in dream or sleep states.

No argument here.

Transmission or no, I am not spiritually gifted. I have had only one such experience. I suppose it was enough, though. I have written about this experience many times, as it lies at the origin point of my writing career and all of my books, each of which is a halting, stumbling, imperfect stuttering of whatever (or whoever) was downloaded into me that Night.

The thing that I am trying to stutter *here* out of that Night is the way that the total experience linked the sexual and the spiritual—how it was super natural. When I chose to go "in" instead of "out," the same energies that I thought were electrocuting me and were certainly sexually arousing me now pulled me "up" and "out" of my body. The erotic morphed into the mystical. Sex flipped over and revealed itself as spirit. Not that it lasted. Not that I remember it in all its details. Not that I know what it all means. But the energetic equation had been drawn by the event, and I would never forget it: sex and spirit are two expressions of the same conscious energy. Our sexualities, with the slightest flip, can reveal themselves to be super sexualities.

And that is why I take Whitley Strieber so seriously. It is not that I "believe" him. I don't believe in beliefs. It is rather the case that I have known a similar state and recognize his descriptions as corresponding to my own. These correspondences and energetic resonances are the real foundation of our friendship, of this book, and of what we have named here the super natural.

Comparing Communions

What happens to our comparative practices when we take such correspondences seriously, even integrate them into our sexual and spiritual orientations? What happens when we take our own altered states of energy and mind as potential insights into the altered states of energy and mind of other human beings in other cultures and times? Certainly, we have to be very careful here. We cannot make naive equations. We cannot take our experiences as boilerplates into which to force fit the rest of humanity. But just as certainly, we *can* identify similarities, sometimes even uncanny similarities. We are not Martians to one another. We are human beings, all.

Let me play just such a comparison out for you here. The correspondences between Indian Tantric traditions and American abduction literature are quite striking—striking enough to raise the eyebrows of the comparativist who happens to know something about both traditions. Central to both, for example, are a broad range of paranormal powers or *siddhis* initiated by the Tantric practice or yoga and the spontaneous abduction experience. Telepathic communications, channeled revelations, and levitation or spiritual flight are some of the most commonly reported. Also central to both are the production of trance and a broad range of possession states, both positive and negative—bliss and terror abound.

Sex with discarnate beings is also a central concern of both literatures. These erotic encounters might be completely spontaneous or unsought and lead toward a kind of human-alien hybridity, as we see in much of the abduction literature. Or they might be ritually and contemplatively cultivated toward a communion or union with a particular deity figure, even an explicit human deification *as* a deity, as we see in the Hindu and Buddhist Tantric traditions. Both the Tantric and abduction literatures are also filled with various kinds of strange photic phenomena, spiritual bodies of light, unearthly radiances, and exotic forms of energy awakening at the base of the spine, shooting up (or down) the spinal column, and floating just above the head, often as a conscious ball or blossom of light. Whereas the powers and energies appear to be uncannily similar, their cultural and mythical expressions remain dramatically different.

A few historians of Tantra have commented on these resonances. My colleague David Gordon White, in my own mind the most eloquent and learned interpreter of the Indian Tantric traditions writing today, has explicitly invoked what he very carefully calls "UFO-like" language to make sense of ancient South Asian Tantric culture in his *Kiss of the Yogini*.[63] Much of this book is actually a robust critique of New Age forms of Western Tantra as inaccurate romantic-weekend representations of the older, much more sophisticated, and much more complicated Indian traditions of Tantric yoga (which had little to do with today's postural yoga practices). In one particularly provocative section, though, David turns to one New Age phenomenon that comes very close to the "Tantric sex"

reported, described, and sought out in the medieval Indian Tantric traditions: the UFO phenomenon.

In sections with titles like "Early South Asian Aviators" and "Men Flying Spacecraft," David writes of flying temples (*vimana*), royal airships, and the "landing fields" and "launching pads" of open-air, circular temples, where contact with the fierce female beings from the sky (the yoginis) were believed to take place. More or less exactly like the female visitor of Whitley's account, these yoginis were described as descending from the sky to abduct, terrify, sexualize, and spiritually awaken the aspirant.

White also writes of the ritual consumption of sexual fluids and the sublimation of sexual pleasure as the yogic means that were used to fuel all of this flying. The *yoni* or sacred vagina of the Goddess—the second "mouth" to be kissed, as it were—has been widely worshipped in India, along with the *lingam* or divine phallus, for millennia for many reasons, but one of them particularly evident in the more secret practices of the Tantric traditions is especially relevant here: sexual fluids were considered to be spiritually potent power substances. Whitley's otherwise bizarre story of finding himself forced into kissing and, I assume, consuming the fluids of the glowing vagina of a feminine alien presence makes remarkably good sense in this context. The scene reads like something straight out of a medieval Tantric ritual. Kiss of the yogini, indeed!

White's careful comparisons between the two bodies of literature are playful and poetic. He is not drawing any literal identification, much less is he offering some ancient astronaut idea. But his comparative play, I would suggest, works so well because the cross-cultural resonances are really there. And—I would add—they are *really* there if one knows the ufological literature as well as an author like David Gordon White knows the South Asian Tantric literature.

To take just one pattern, it is again striking to observe that bodily substances like semen, blood, and even feces are sometimes said to be collected in both the mythologized Tantric rituals and the reported abduction events. Again, Whitley's strikingly honest description of the visitors collecting fecal samples and semen from him in his first abduction experience fit eerily well into a Tantric context. Obviously, something at once biological, sexual, and spiritual is being articulated in both cultural contexts. In the ancient South Asian context, this something is coded

toward a human-divine union, deification, and experienced flight. In the modern American context, it is coded toward an evolutionary transformation, a spiritual mutation, and various out-of-body experiences, that is, another kind of flight.

To take this comparative practice one step further, yoginis in South Asia were sometimes depicted as avicephalic, that is, bird-headed. David reproduces a photograph of a statue of such a bird-headed yogini. The face of the yogini strongly resembles the famous long-faced, pointed-chin, tiny-mouthed female being of Whitley's *Communion* cover. Go look at the photograph of the bird-headed yogini.[64] She looks like an owl. Or an alien.

David and I are not the only ones to note, playfully or seriously, this obvious comparison between Indian Tantra and the various visual, erotic, and psychical patterns of the American mythology of the alien and the UFO. Whitley himself recognized the same iconic resonance in the pages of *Communion* and even names Kali and the Indian Tantric traditions there, along with the ancient Sumerian goddess Ishtar, as especially close to what he saw and knew as Her. He sees the resonances, although he does not draw any kind of simplistic equation.[65]

Nor am I. I am *not* arguing that: "The modern contactee experience is about Indian Tantra." Nor am I saying: "Indian Tantra was inspired by aliens." These simplistic claims are species of the religious and reductive comparisons that I rejected in chapter 1. Neither can work in the end. What can work is an honest and systematic observation of the very clear comparative resonances between the two cultural traditions.

The project of "comparing communions" might also eventually lead to the development of a new mystical practice, a western "contact yoga" in deep conversation with our religious pasts (all of them), our evolutionary biology, our quantum physics, our cosmology, and our new understandings of human sexuality. Certainly such a future practice will require a much richer and more generous imagining of the divine presence. He must also become She. Just such a vision is clearly suggested by Whitley's repeated call for a conscious practice of "communion" that would comanifest or coconjure both self and Other.

Were we to pursue such a comparative practice and such a contact yoga, we might someday be able to spiral up and isolate some shared super-

realities behind the different and yet similar cultural phenomena of the Tantric yoga traditions and the American abduction literature. I do not know what those deeper processes might be. I am only suggesting them, pointing toward them. But, clearly, *something* is flying around in our folklore. And it's something super sexual.

10

Physical Traces and the Feral Boy

WHITLEY

One night in February of 1986, I found myself conscious but unable to wake up fully. There was something moving in my left nostril, as if some sort of object was being inserted. The next thing I knew, there was a terrific *crack* in my forehead between my eyes.

This started me on a long and improbable journey in a completely unexpected direction. There can be no question that there is a physical dimension to this experience. I say no question because of the fact that the evidence is sufficiently documented outside of my own experience. Within it, there is both a confirmed "implant," which has been examined by a doctor, and which I well remember being placed in my body. Additionally, I have had contact with an extremely strange man, which I shall describe in detail.

But these two points of evidence are inside my experience. There is more. Much more.

In April of 1989, I was contacted by a Manhattan radiologist who had read my account of my apparent implantation in *Transformation* and proposed to do an MRI to see if anything was there. He also asked if I could get some additional witnesses to participate.

As Anne was carefully noting such things as reports of possible implantation in the letters we were receiving, we were able to provide a group of people who claimed to have had similar experiences.

We gathered a group of witnesses, some of whom flew to New York to participate. For the most part, their brain scans were normal, but one of them was suggestive. The report reads, "In the right anterior ethmoid cell, just at the margin with the nasal cavity, is a small polypoid structure approximately 5mm. x 3mm. This displays equal intensity on both the proton density and the T2 images obtained."

Initially, I was excited, but the report went on to say, "Slight prolongation of T2 relaxation times within the nasal turbinates is noted, which may be related to a recent allergy or respiratory infection." And the witness did report such an infection. This meant that the object might have been an ordinary nasal polyp, and not one that was a candidate for surgical intervention. So it was never excised.

The next month, in May of 1989, I had an experience that completely changed my understanding of what was happening to me. Previously, I had been clinging to the notion that, even though I had physical symptoms as a result of my December 1985 experience, it was not, in its essence, something that had happened physically. In this, I was like most people of a scientific and skeptical mind about the paranormal: willing to explore it as long as it remained safely under control—that is, outside of the physical world. Once it enters the physical, it threatens our entire vision of reality. More than threatens it—it devastates it.

Just a month after the failure of the MRI study to find any clearly identifiable implants in me or any of the other test subjects, my reality was devastated. As long as my experiences were ambiguous, I could face them, even explore them. I could go out into the woods at night and confront the visitors, never sure about whether or not I was confronting myself or something in the world around me.

The event that took place on that night in May changed all this. At this moment, I reach up, I touch my left ear, and I feel, over a quarter of a century later, the same agonizing nakedness and vulnerability I felt when I first realized that it was there.

Late May of that year was warm, and we slept with the windows open. At about eleven thirty, Anne was asleep. As was often the case when we

were at our cabin, I lay awake in the dark, trying not to listen for sounds in the night. By that time, I was walking in the woods at night only occasionally. On this night, we'd watched an old movie and then retired.

I had an elaborate alarm system, and a system of lights around the house that could be turned on by a bank of switches at the bedside. The window alarms were set up in such a way that the windows could be opened, which they were. I also had a Benelli riot gun and an AMD backup pistol. The Benelli was under the bed, the AMD in a drawer in the table beside it. Both were loaded, and I was well practiced in using them.

I was more afraid, at that point, of the public than I was of the supposed aliens. Locally, I was as feared and despised as I was nationally. I'd been spat on in airports, which was bad enough, but I'd also had my grocery basket spat in at the local store, and that was frightening, because it meant that the people around me hated me as much as did the general public.

This was because the debunking and the media hostility allowed people to think that I was a fraudster and deserved to be punished. Such an opportunity brings out the bully in even the mildest of us, as I was becoming painfully aware.

So when I heard the unmistakable crunch of gravel in the driveway, I was absolutely terrified. There could be no question: there was a vehicle right outside. It had gotten around our stoutly locked gate. We were under attack. At once, I turned in the bed, reaching for the bank of switches that would flood the area around the house with light.

A moment after I heard the gravel crunching, a quiet male voice said from the backyard, "Condition red."

Instead of going after the light switches, I bent to get the Benelli. This was my worst-case scenario: not a person but people, a whole group of them. By this time, I was used to the visitors. The guns weren't for them. They were there to protect us from a much more dangerous species: our neighbors.

As I reached down for the shotgun, I saw standing in the doorway across the room from the foot of the bed, two people, a man and a woman. The woman was in front, the man behind. She was perhaps five foot five or six. He was six feet or more and had a beard. I have stated at times that

there was an “alien” with them, but, looking back, the two of them are all I can clearly remember.

The terror that went through me is completely indescribable. I remember it as a disorienting shock, like being slapped hard and unexpectedly across the face. I also remember it as sickening and enraging. I wanted to retch. I wanted to blow them apart.

Before I could so much as grasp the gun, they were upon me. I found myself lying on my right side, with pressure being applied to the left side of my head in waves. I tried with every muscle in my body to move, but I could not. I could hear the woman’s voice murmuring words I could not understand, and feel her hands resting against the side of my head. I then felt pressure against my head, coming in waves, as if they were pushing it hard, to the point that I felt compressed against the mattress. I could not see and I could not move.

Abruptly, they stopped. As I turned over, preparing to leap out of the bed, there was a flash of light from outside and a great crashing in the woods. I had the impression that, whoever they were, they were not only running away from me but from something else that was there. I’ve never known why I felt this.

I saw that the alarm system was still armed. Then I threw on all the floodlights around the house. I took my pistol out of my drawer and went racing through the house from the basement to the attic. I found not a door unlocked, not a window ajar, and no sign of any intruders.

Returning to the bedroom, I convinced myself that it must have been a vivid dream. How could I draw any other conclusion, given the state of the property? It didn’t seem right, though. I had seen those people, heard them. At times after the incident, I remembered a shadowy, mean-looking figure with them, not human. Looking back now, though, all I recall is the young woman and her bearded companion.

Leaving the outside lights on, I went back to bed, sleeping fitfully until morning. Our usual routine on arising was to shower, then for Anne to start breakfast while I went out to a small local grocery and bought the morning papers.

On opening the door between the den and the garage, I was startled to see that even though I had not yet disarmed the alarm system, the big

garage door was wide open. As the alarm system was still armed, this was impossible—unless, of course, the system had been tampered with.

At this point, I disarmed the system, got into the car, turned it on, and began to back out. But why did I do this instead of reacting in some way to the situation that confronted me? Why not call the alarm man? He was a friend and lived only a few miles away.

The reason is the same one that confronts most intellectuals when they face an intrusion like this. This wasn't imaginal, as Jeff has defined it elsewhere in this book. It certainly wasn't imaginary. The door was open. The alarm system was still armed. And I did not want to face what was now plainly before me. There had been an intrusion into the house, and it was physical, and my memory suggested that it was extremely strange.

As I backed the car out, electric sparks shot between my hands and the steering wheel, then began snapping against my cheek as I turned around and my face drew closer to the side window.

This I could not ignore. I was afraid that the car might explode, so I jumped out and ran back into the house. I went to Anne and asked her if she remembered anything unusual during the night. She did not.

Normally, that would have been the end of it. Never mind the strange electrostatic phenomena. I could ignore that. But I could not ignore that garage door. It had been wide open and the alarm system had still been armed.

I now called the alarm man, who came over in a few minutes. In checking the switches, he discovered that there was a powerful magnetic field that had kept the system from reacting when the door was opened.

The magnetic field seemed to have no source. They don't propagate like radio waves, but rather remain around whatever is generating them. The problem was there was absolutely nothing generating this magnetic field. So how could it exist? And yet it did.

We then downloaded the system's log, only to find that the clock had been altered and there was no way to tell what time the various entries and exits it had recorded had actually happened.

The alarm man replaced the switches on the garage door and left, leaving me with some very uneasy questions.

Later that afternoon, my left ear began to hurt. Of course, I'd gone over the events of the night in my mind again and again. I'd discussed them

with Anne, but there had been no way to resolve the mystery.

I will never forget standing in the bathroom feeling the pinna of my left ear, where the pain was coming from, and feeling within it a new lump. I got Anne to feel it. She said it was faintly red, but there was no sign of broken skin. So, what was it?

I thought I knew, of course. I thought it was an implant. I spent the night pacing and sweating. Sometime around three, when I was cold and terrified and unable to sleep, I seriously considered cutting my ear off.

Morning brought two things—first, Anne didn't react to it the way I had. She thought it was fascinating and that it might prove to be a very interesting thing to possess. Why did I assume that it was something bad? Why would it be? We don't implant animals with things that are going to harm them. On the contrary, our implants are in various ways supportive, never harmful. What would be the point? If you want to do them harm, it's not hard. Just shoot them.

A couple of days later, I went to the doctor. He took a look at it and said it was a small cyst. How long had I had it? A week, I said. He said if it became infected to come back and he'd remove it. But it did not.

Instead, after another week or so, it turned on. I heard a screeching sound in my ear, which became hot and, Anne reported, bright red. This effect came and went without incident.

That night I was meditating as usual when there suddenly appeared in my mind's eye a startling vision of what was clearly another world. I say startling because it was as clear as television imagery. It lasted only a few seconds, but it was so complex, so vividly detailed that it was hard to see it as a product of my imagination. It was an image of a dirt street overspread with flags that contained bold writing on them in an unknown language. On both sides of the street there were low buildings. Then the image was gone.

This was one of many such images. But there had been a lot of others prior to the implant, and I'd be the last person to advocate that they were anything but imaginary. And yet, they haunted me, some of them, because they were so detailed and so strange.

Four years after the object was placed in my ear, we moved to San Antonio from upstate New York. I soon found myself invited to speak at the Mind Science Foundation, which had been created by a visionary named Tom Slick, who had been a friend of my parents. An enormously successful

oilman, he had also founded the Southwest Research Institute, which remains one of the world's leading scientific research facilities.

After giving my talk to the Mind Science group, I was introduced to William Mallow, head of materials science at Southwest Research. We met again soon after, and I told him of the implant. As it happened, it turned on in his office. He saw my ear turn bright red, and rushed me into a signals lab. We were not able to detect any emissions.

Naturally, Bill was interested in seeing the thing. As it happened, I had met an internist, Dr. John Lerma, who was willing to try to remove it. I went to his office where he prepared to perform the minor surgery that would enable him to remove the object. I had not told him the object's origin, only that it would grow irritated when I slept on it, and I wanted it removed. He knew that I'd written *Communion*, so he had his own ideas about what he might be dealing with, but he kept them to himself.

He located the object just below the apex of the pinna, and drew a circle around it with a marker. It was fixed in place. It had never moved. He anesthetized the ear, then made an incision. A moment later he said, "It's a white disk." He then touched it with a scalpel, whereupon it slipped away, leaving him with just a fragment of it on the instrument.

He determined that it had moved, on its own, from the top of my ear down into the earlobe. He said that he'd have to cut my ear to pieces if he was going to extract it. Instead, he pulled out and closed the wound.

He sent the fragment for a routine pathology exam and was surprised, a few days later, to receive a phone call from the pathologist instead of the usual written report. The pathologist first asked him if the fragment was some sort of practical joke. When Dr. Lerma explained that it had come out of the pinna of a patient's ear, he responded that it was a fragment of metal with cilia anchored in it, and that the cilia were motile—that is to say, they were moving. He thought that they must be alive.

A few days after the surgery, I felt a burning sensation in my ear, and the object returned to its original position, where it remains to this day.

At this point, I was in a quandary. For years now, I'd had an invader in my body, positioned just millimeters from my brain. Always, in the back of my mind, was the notion that I could get rid of it if I wanted to. And yet, I'd been tantalized by those vivid images of other worlds, and so hadn't previously tried to have it removed.

Now I discovered that I could not get rid of it. The fear involved was quite terrible—actually, very much like claustrophobia. I'd long since gotten used to feeling watched. My deepest privacy was no longer private, but that hadn't bothered me. I have nothing to hide. What is visible on the outside is the same as what is within me.

Again and again, the images of the man and woman who came into my room to do this to me reappeared in my memory. I relived the incident, looking in my mind for some clue that might reveal more. But there was nothing. I was at an impasse.

Then I was contacted by a podiatrist from California, Dr. Roger Leir, saying that he had an interest in implants. He claimed that he had removed small metallic objects encased in epidermal tissue from three people who claimed alien contact, and I soon verified this claim.

When I entered into a correspondence with him, it developed that he was going to conduct another series of surgeries, and I asked to attend as a witness.

In 1995, Dr. Leir had attended a UFO convention at which he had met a man who claimed to have one of these implants in his body. Leir had reacted by suggesting to him that he get an X-ray. When it came back showing an object embedded in the man's arm Dr. Leir was, to say the least, surprised.

Leir himself was licensed to conduct surgeries only below the ankle, so he enlisted the help of a general surgeon to extract objects from other areas of the body. It was decided that they would only do relatively easy excisions. Nothing from the brain, or close to vital organs, for example.

I attended a surgery in 1996, and was deeply moved to hear the stories told by the witnesses, all of whom had memories, some clear and others more vague, of being approached by what they assumed to be aliens. Later, they found little scoop-mark scars on their bodies and, in some cases, also raised areas where something appeared to have been placed under the skin.

Leir soon had a collection of these objects, and I introduced him to Bill Mallow at Southwest Research. Bill began testing the objects, but not without objections from management. He was told by the director that their CIA client, who provided almost half of the institute's annual budget, took a "dim view," of what he described as "UFO research."

I didn't see it as that at all. These were not unidentified objects, and they certainly weren't flying. They were identified bits of metal extracted from people's bodies. To me, the question of who had introduced them, if anybody, was still very much an open one.

Under the scanning electron microscope, they were found to be composed of iron with traces of nickel and other metals present. They were typical of meteoric iron. But what were meteor fragments doing embedding themselves under people's skin? There is no known phenomenon that would cause this. Moreover, they were found encased in skin, and yet were embedded in deep tissue. The body does not have the genetic encoding to generate skin inside muscle tissue. The conclusion that the presence of these objects, like the one in my body, was not an accident of nature was hard to avoid.

In 1998, Dr. Leir told me that he had located one in a man's neck that was emitting a low-power FM signal. Bill and I were extremely interested, because we had found absolutely no sign of any technology in any of the others Roger had given us. But if there was a signal, there must also be a circuit of some kind, or a crystal.

The study we did on this object was recorded in the 1998 NBC special "Confirmation." Bill first ran it through the electron microscope, and received the same readings as with the previous objects: it was iron, with traces of nickel, the composition typical of a meteor. We then took it to the nearby University of Texas at San Antonio and put it in an X-Ray diffraction machine. Our hope was that we might see some structure beneath the object's surface.

On the first pass, the machine recorded the presence of the object, but after that it became X-ray invisible. We took it back to the SEM, which showed no change. Over many more passes and despite the fact that it was nearly pure iron, the diffraction machine never again detected its presence.

The skeptical community either dismissed the objects as naturally occurring, or ignored them altogether. However, they cannot be naturally occurring, and as difficult as it is, the truth must be faced: there is at present no explanation for what they are, but there is substantial witness testimony —including my own—that they are placed in the body by unknown presences.

Does this mean that aliens are involved? I wish I knew, but I don't. I saw people do it to me. Others have seen strange looking creatures. Most have found the objects after the fact, and have no clear memory of how they got into their bodies.

It's too early to conclude anything about them other than that they are there and cannot presently be explained. Everything else is speculation, but it's a provocative problem, and it deserves more scientific and medical notice than it has so far received.

Of all the things that have happened to me, there are only a few others that involve physical traces, and these all concern the presence of beings. I have elsewhere described the various multiple-witness events that took place at my cabin in upstate New York. There is one incident, however, that I haven't described, which involves a small, very emotionally intense man and some surprising things that he did.

I first came across him in the woods behind our cabin, sitting under a tree smoking a cigarette. My initial impression was that he was a boy of about twelve, and I was concerned about his smoking when the woods were summer-dry. But when I walked over to ask him to stop, I found myself confronted by somebody who struck me as very strange and, in fact, sinister.

He had the face of an immature boy, but his skin was weathered, as if he was much older, but had never reached puberty. My impression was, frankly, of somebody rather freakish.

When I asked him to stop smoking, he made a growling sound. I had the feeling that if I was to get any closer to him, he would lash out.

What in the world was I confronting? Many an author attracts lunatics, I'm not the only one. But this—what was he, a child or an adult? And that growl—my God, it sounded dreadful.

I was quite deep in the forest, and so turned away from him and headed back to the house. I wanted no part of somebody like that, and was glad to get back home without being followed—at least, so it seemed.

I mentioned him to Anne, and we deliberated about whether or not he might be a neighbor's child. But we knew our neighbors and nobody had a child like that. So, was he somebody with mental problems and a bizarre deformity? If so, perhaps we should call the state police.

In the end, we decided that he probably was just some kid out there smoking in secret. Better that than crystal meth, which was endemic among the rural poor of the area.

But then I began to notice a change in our very quiet and private corner of the world. In the night when the air was still, I would notice the odor of cigarette smoke drifting into the house. There were no other houses nearby, so where was it coming from?

Could it be that we were being watched? I kept the alarm on at all times and the doors and windows locked, and after dark I kept my pistol in my pocket. At night, we closed all the blinds and curtains.

I finally telephoned the state police, and eventually a detective from the criminal investigation division showed up. I described the person I'd seen in the woods. Unfortunately, he knew who I was and when I mentioned that he was "little," he said scornfully, "A little man?" It didn't take long for him to leave, and I was left alone with my problem. I suppose that his main job was raiding meth labs and crack houses, and when he saw that this case wasn't leading in that direction, he was no longer concerned. And then there was what Anne and I had come to call the "Strieber Factor," where the mere mention of our name causes snickering and generalized disbelief. Once the Strieber Factor manifests itself, that's the end of any serious interest.

So we were left to deal with the problem on our own, and for some weeks, all was quiet.

As summer waned, Anne and I decided to take some last swims in our pool before we shut it down for the winter. As it was entirely private, our habit was to swim naked. This time, though, when we went out, we were appalled to hear somebody running up and down in the woods just behind a thick growth of underbrush. They were gasping and breaking sticks, as if trying to warn us off.

We returned to the house and stopped using the backyard altogether.

Once again, though, weeks passed without any further manifestations of our intruder.

When the leaves changed, we decided to take a walk. We were still uneasy enough for me to take the pistol, but the lure of the forest with its riot of color was strong. We were far back in the woods when we found, to our horror, a sort of nest. The ground was beaten down, tree limbs had been

broken and pushed aside to make a small space, and it was thick with cigarette butts.

That was the last of the woods for us. We returned to the house and never went back out.

Over the course of the season, my financial condition deteriorated further. Soon, it became clear that we could no longer afford the cabin, so we packed up our car and moved to a tiny condo we owned in San Antonio.

We had not been there for a month when I began to smell cigarette smoke in the bedroom at night. I soon discovered that somebody was standing in a corner of the little garden where the end of the screened-in porch created a cul-de-sac. In that corner, they were not more than two feet from the head of the bed, albeit on the other side of a wall.

During this time, also, neighbors began noticing what appeared to be a strange child doing things like climbing the walls of the building, getting onto decks, and damaging possessions found there. Texas state social services were called. At the same time, I identified two very strange men living in the condo immediately behind ours. I first saw one of them stealing tobacco products at the local drugstore. He went out with easily two hundred dollars' worth of pipe tobacco, cigarettes, cigars, and whatnot. As he passed me, we locked eyes, and I saw there a frightful malevolence.

The clerks let him pass without a challenge, and yet the theft was blatant. It was as if they didn't even see him. He was real, though, and it soon became clear that the strange boy—if that's what he was—was living with the two men in the apartment behind ours.

I telephoned the managing agent and got the number of the owner of the condo, who lived in Houston. My intent was to complain about his tenants. When I called him, however, he said that he didn't have any tenants. As far as he knew, the apartment was empty. I told him that it was occupied by three individuals, two men and a boy. He was outraged, and said that he'd call the sheriff at once and have them evicted.

I bought a motion-sensitive floodlight and installed it in the cul-de-sac. That night, it went off time and time again, and there was the sound of somebody shuffling back and forth, sighing loudly, and making low growling sounds.

I spent the night wide awake, terrified.

The next morning, I was weeding our little garden when the "boy" burst around the corner of the building and went strutting off down the middle of the street, never to be seen again.

Soon, an eviction notice appeared on the door of the apartment, and—incredibly—the two men started going from door to door trying to sell the condo owner's furniture! Nobody would buy it, of course. It wasn't a large complex, and everyone in it knew what was happening.

Soon after, the two men also left, and as far as I know, that's the end of the story. I have never seen the two men or the strange boy again, and I never want to. But they were entirely real. Were they somehow connected with aliens? For that matter, were the implants installed by aliens?

I have no idea. But my implant is there, and it and the others await serious scientific study. Instead, following the lead of the intellectual community, scientists ignore what to me is an obvious point of entry into an unknown reality. The implants exist. They are found encased in skin and embedded in deep tissue. Therefore, they are not accidental inclusions, but something put there intentionally.

But why, and by whom? And who were the people who placed an exotic, technologically advanced object in my ear without even making an incision?

Who was the "boy?" Where is he now? And why was he so disturbed, and the men with him so sinister? If they are aliens, what's the matter with them? And if not, then who are they and, once again, what's the matter with them?

I leave these questions for future science to address usefully. So far, that has not been done.

11

The Magical Object

JEFF

It's the old controversy—the action of mind upon matter. But, in the philosophy of the hyphen, an uncrossable gap is disposed of, and the problem is rendered into thinkable terms, by asking whether mind-matter can act upon matter-mind.

Charles Fort, *Wild Talents*

It is my personal opinion that in the science of the future reality will neither be "psychic" nor "physical" but somehow both and somehow neither.

quantum physicist Wolfgang Pauli

Whatever it is, the thing in Whitley's ear is important, but probably not for any of the reasons that are ordinarily offered. For example, it is probably not important because it was put there by aliens. What is the evidence of that?

I am also skeptical that there were living human beings in the room doing this to him, although I know Whitley disagrees with me here. I am skeptical for two basic reasons: first, because of what Whitley describes as "a flash of light from outside and a great crashing in the woods" from which the intruders appeared to be running away; this suggests something more spectral or UFO-like than military professionals. Second, I am

skeptical, because we have numerous other cases in the literatures in which figures that looked and acted completely physical and "real" were not really there, not at least in physical bodies like you and I inhabit at the moment. I am thinking of physical apparitions of dead loved ones in which the body appears very much as a three-dimensional, solid, perfectly normal object in space. I take the human figures of Whitley's narrative, then, to be projected apparitions in some sense, which leaves the door open to their true nature and whether their projectors were in fact human, nonhuman, or future-human.

I could be very wrong. Other aspects of the event look very much like a military-style abduction. Or were these individuals—I don't know any other way to say this—real human beings from the future? The crashing light in the woods suggests a strange presence of some kind. Clearly, there was also an electromagnetic signature, suggestive of some advanced technology. I am willing to be wrong, spectacularly wrong.

It also seems highly unlikely that the implant is important because it works as some kind of tracking device. Given the recent advances of nanotechnology (which are no doubt mere baby steps into some major leaps on the horizon that will involve creating minuscule intelligence technologies that are completely invisible to the naked eye), why sophisticated aliens, or even technologically savvy human beings for that matter, would need to resort to crude skin scoops and chunks of metal painfully embedded in an ear or leg in order to spy on a human being is simply beyond my powers of sympathy. It makes no sense.

There *is* something very interesting about technology going on here, though. And it is this. Whatever was interacting with Whitley was also interacting with the technologies of his cabin (in particular the security system and the garage door). But, again, for anyone who knows the parapsychological literature, this is hardly surprising, since spirit-interaction with technology is "old hat." In an earlier era, candles would go out when a person died. Then mechanical clocks stopped. More recently, the spirits (and UFOs) have moved on to interact with telephones, television sets, radios, tractors, cars, trucks, computer systems, billion-dollar fighter jets, and, allegedly, even nuclear missile sites. Then there is, of course, Whitley's own electric body. Clearly, there is something electromagnetic about the phenomena in question.

If none of these "explanations" really works, then what might be going on here? I think there are multiple entry points into this baffling subject (really object). In the following few pages, let me orbit around Whitley's ear and see what it looks like from four different angles: (1) the history and folklore of shamanism; (2) a famous New Testament text compared well; (3) another story about another magical object; and (4) another intellectual-spiritual practice to put in our developing toolbox for how to think about the unexplained. At first blush, these strategies may seem disconnected, but I think they throw some light on the object in Whitley's ear.

I want to be very clear and humble about that "some light," however. I really cannot explain Whitley's apparent implant, much less the feral boy. Both may be explainable through entirely different strategies than I offer in the present chapter. In any case, my strategies here are not dependent on Whitley's object, which may turn out to be something entirely different, or nothing at all. In any case, the four strategies set out below would remain as viable ways forward elsewhere, whatever the particular status of Whitley's own "implant" turns out to be.

In the end, I think my highly speculative "explanation" (that Whitley's mind, or, better, that Mind in which Whitley's mind is embedded, teleported the implant into his ear and messed with the technology of his cabin home) is more fantastic than the alien implant hypothesis. But this often happens when one tries to explain the unexplainable. The "explanations" just get more and more outlandish.

That is also a clue, though, and maybe *the* clue. Maybe there is no explanation. Maybe the unexplained remains unexplained because explanation is the wrong way to think about such events. Maybe an entirely different way of knowing is being called for here. Maybe these events cannot be explained because they are not caused through any ordinary physical channels. Maybe they are *expressions* of something. Maybe we should be *reading them*. And maybe, if we tried this, what we would finally read is not some positive truth to measure and prove (a technological object with the ability to receive radio signals) or some new piece of folklore to believe (extraterrestrial implants to track us), but a playful reminder that our present cognitive hardware and cultural software are simply not up to the task of understanding who we are and what (or who) the world is.

What if the secret message of these inexplicable things is to call us out of our present worldview? What if they are here to frustrate and say away *all* of our present explanations and beliefs so that we can, as it were, start anew?

By now, you know me. You know that this is not really a question. You know that this is precisely what I think.

The Calling

As with so much else about Whitley's experiences, the history of religions offers us multiple clues to what may be happening in his ear. Many of these clues lie in the fertile but confusing loam of the folklore around shamanism.

"Shamanism" is a comparative construct, a word anthropologists made up to talk and think about a great deal of ethnographic material from around the world that is very different but also, they thought, related somehow, much like we use the word "ritual" to describe a Catholic Mass, a Hindu *puja*, or "worship," of a deity, and a Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca. Obviously, these are very different practices in terms of their content and intentions, and yet they are also similar in terms of their function or what they accomplish: all such rituals "act out" and "dramatize" the belief system of the religion in question, whatever that belief system happens to be. So too with the comparative category of the shaman: there are numerous different cultural contents and contexts invoked here, but there are also many similar functions or powers.

The word "shaman" comes from the Tungus language and culture of Siberia. It means "sorcerer" and has come to name a religious specialist or magical prodigy in different indigenous cultures. These prodigies might fill any number of roles, including healer or "medicine man," medium, out-of-body traveler, psychic military scout, community storyteller, and spiritual leader. It is also important to remember that shamans can be very ambiguous figures. Their magic, after all, can often be used for positive or negative ends, for healing or cursing and killing. Much like "the sacred," as a category the shaman possesses both a bright and dark side. Hence the original Tungus "sorcerer."

In truth, the category of shamanism is probably way too broad and general. It has come to name so many disparate cultural practices that it itself has become virtually meaningless. Still, the category does give us a way of noticing particular resonances or similarities between the traditional cultures and our own contemporary materials. As long as we do not "essentialize" the category, that is, confuse it with a single, unchanging religious meaning, we can use it as a helpful, comparative lens with which to focus our gaze. Here is how.

The calling of the shaman is often signaled by what Mircea Eliade, in his classic study *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* (1964), called an "initiatory illness," a severe psychological trial or physical illness that effects a transformation of the future shaman's being, that spiritually mutates him, if you will. Other common tropes include the presence of "power animals" or totems; the ability to leave one's body and travel in the interworld; a proclivity for trance states and robust visionary experience; erotic contact or marriage between the shaman and a particular deity, spirit, or discarnate being; and the use of psychoactive sacred plants to catalyze and supercharge these various magical powers.

And there is more. Sometimes, particularly in Australia, the calling of the shaman is announced by a god or spirit inserting (we would say "implanting") a magical stone or crystal into the individual's body. Eliade, for example, cites the ethnographic literature on Australian indigenous religions, where we find stories of a supernatural being named Nagatya consecrating the medicine man by opening up his belly and inserting rock crystals that will bestow magical powers on him. Another Australian tribal culture is reported to take the neophyte to a cemetery, bind him up, and leave him there for several days. It is said that animals come and lick his wounds, after which a man appears, inflicts a wound in the initiate's head, and inserts a magical stone the size of a lemon into the wound. Afterward, the spirits arrive in order to teach him the healing songs.[66] Note that we find here exactly what we find in Whitley's narrative: an ordinary "man" appearing in the middle of an otherwise completely fantastic narrative.

Rock crystals are particularly important to the Australian shamans, since they are believed to have been "thrown from the sky by Supreme Beings or to have fallen from these divinities' celestial thrones."[67] Whether

purely symbolic or actually material, or both at the same time, the message is clear enough: the inserted magical stone or rock crystal symbolizes, indeed *materializes* the newfound vocation of the shaman. There is literally something "special," "different," or "other" in him now. He has been set apart, called to a special place in the community. He has been *chosen*.

The reason that all of these obscure references and unknown cultural practices are relevant in the present context is that many of the exact same features or functions appear in Whitley's experiences and books. The entire drama of *Communion*, for example, can be seen as a kind of initiatory trial or illness. His famous owls and wolves can be seen to function as power animals or guiding totemic spirits. His proclivity for trance, out-of-body travel, and visionary experience are patently obvious to anyone who cares to look at his books with an open mind. And the sexual encounter, even "sacred marriage" elements are both graphic and central ones. Hence his deep moral concerns about "cheating" on his wife (a theme also found in the literature on shamanism). Even more to the point here, his "implant" can well be seen as a "magical stone" that signals a shamanic calling. As support for such a reading, consider the simple fact that much of his initial abduction experience as recounted in *Communion* revolved around a single word uttered by the almond-eyed female visitor: She told him that he had been "chosen."[68]

Whitley resists this ominous word, and for very good moral reasons. But the calling does not go away by virtue of that oh so reasonable rejection. And that rejection, of course, is *also* a classic response to a religious calling, including the prophetic calling in the Western monotheistic cultures, which are no doubt culturally closer than the shamanic examples (although, as many have pointed out, the biblical prophets display any number of shamanic-like elements). Indeed, it is what every other prophet does: deny or run away from the calling.

The fact that Whitley has in turn been rejected by the official cultures of the public media, the scientific establishment, and conservative religion for his prophetic voice does nothing to challenge such a vocational reading of the "magical stone" in his ear. Indeed, it only strengthens it, since this is what often happens to the prophet in Western culture: he or she is rejected by the cultural elites.

Whitley, of course, cannot say any of this. But I can say it. And I just did.

I will also say something else: none of these comparative observations between the shamanic and alien materials are exactly original. The Harvard psychiatrist John E. Mack realized quite quickly that his abductee patients (another kind of "initiatory illness" again) had close analogues in the comparative literature on shamanism. Indeed, in his *Abduction: Human Encounters with Aliens* (1994), Mack invokes Eliade's comparative study of shamanism as one means of trying to understand the abduction phenomenon. Mack compares the abductees to a kind of unconscious shaman whose out-of-body experiences and visions he then contextualizes within humanity's long history of encounters with beings from the sky.

What the modern abductee or patient lacks, of course, is any adequate cultural framework or mythology for making sense of his or her experiences. This "disconnect" or "cultural ignorance," it seems to me, is the most important point to emphasize. We lack a paradigm to make sense of our own spiritual experiences, and so these events can only appear bizarre, anomalous, or even just crazy. They are usually no such thing, as we have already seen. We can see this quite clearly if we simply place them in a broader context, that is, compare and historically contextualize them with other similar patterns in the history of religions, as we have done again right here.

There is another payoff. Once we perform these kinds of comparisons, we might well find our comparisons "attracting" other confirming data. Consider this e-mail written in response to my thoughts articulated above:

> Whitley Strieber
> January 1, 2015, 10:19 a.m.
> To: Jeff Kripal
> Re: ch. 9
>
> I think it's important that we take this discussion beyond where it is now, which is that either aliens put these things in or they are simply trivial. I would be extremely surprised if aliens have anything to do with any of this. The magical stones of shamanism are quite interesting. Your mention of them caused me to recall that I was "given" such a stone, which I still have. I dreamed about it in the night, then walked outside and there it lay in the middle of our driveway.

Also you will recall in the kobold section, the being that rushed out of my brother's room was carrying a stone, glowing red.

W

Paul's Implant

Before we leave the precedents of Whitley's implant in the history of religions, let me clarify something that goes to the heart of this book and its conversation. Let me emphasize what I am *not* saying.

I am not saying: "Whitley Strieber is a shaman." Nor am I saying: "Whitley Strieber is a prophet." Nor am I saying: "Shamanism and prophecy around the globe are functions of alien abductions." These are exactly what I am not doing. They are, after all, good examples of the simplistic religious and reductive comparative practices that I described and criticized in my opening chapter. We need to stop doing that. We need to get better at comparison.

What would a better comparison look like? Well, the first thing it would do is *step back* and stop identifying with *any* religious or cultural context, be it traditional or modern. We first "make the cut." Neither the traditional shaman nor the modern abductee can be privileged here.

Once we step back like this, we will not, of course, make any kind of simplistic equation between the phenomena of traditional shamanism and the modern abduction literature *in either direction*. Rather, we might "spiral up" and suggest that similar psychological, physiological, erotic and physical processes are behind both the traditional shamanic practices and the modern abduction phenomena, magical stone-implants and all. We might also point out that we cannot get to these deeper processes at this stage of our knowledge, but that we can see their related expressions, ciphers or codes in the history of religions.

Let me give you a single excellent example of comparison done well. Consider the work of David Halperin. David is a professional scholar of religion, an expert on, among other things, the book and psychopathology of Ezekiel (chariot and all), Jewish mysticism, and the modern UFO phenomenon. In one of the many astonishing posts on his blog, *Journal of a*

UFO Investigator, David tackles the difficult topic of implants. He suggests that the West's first "abductee" was none other than St. Paul, who was famously "caught up" to the third heaven, whether in the body or not he did not know, and complained of a "thorn in the flesh" given to him by a messenger of Satan to harass him (2 Corinthians 12:1–9). Was this an ancient negative "implant" experience? Halperin even includes a photo of an alleged modern alien implant that looks pretty much, well, exactly like a thorn.

Think that Halperin is claiming that Paul was abducted by aliens? Think again. Listen:

> *I need to be absolutely clear. I am not, not, NOT suggesting that Paul was kidnapped by space creatures. If you've been following this blog, you know I don't believe that's what the UFOs are. But suppose UFO abductions are a contemporary manifestation of some transcendent human experience, and that experience was known to the ancients as well as to us. (Which would make sense, if it's part of what we are as human beings.) Why shouldn't we consider the possibility that the feeling of something alien being intruded into the body may have been a recurring feature?*[69]

Note the move here. Note how Halperin does not fetishize *either* the ancient Jewish materials (Paul was a Jewish rabbi) *or* the modern UFO phenomena but suggests that both are expressions or manifestations of "some transcendent human experience" known both to the ancients and to us in different codes (there is the spiral up). Note also that he is advancing no causal or mechanistic explanation. Rather, he is concerned to identify similarities across the centuries and the cultures toward some deeper and more adequate theory of the human being, which we do not have yet. This, of course, is precisely the kind of comparisons I have been proposing in these pages.

The Honey Jar

None of this, of course, quite reaches the weirddom of Whitley's implant. I mean, it's one thing to speculate about an ancient "thorn in the flesh," which may well have been a metaphor for something else, like sexual temptation (other expert readers, for example, have speculated that it is a coded reference to Paul's illicit homoerotic desires, which were eventually sublimated into his wish to become a "virgin of Christ" and "married" to the god-man). It's quite another to make sense of a living crawly thing in an ear. But this next story gets us closer. Way closer. In fact, when I read Whitley's chapter on the implant it immediately reminded me of something else. It reminded me of a honey jar.

It was my colleague's honey jar. Let us call him Dan. Dan is an extremely accomplished academic teaching at a prestigious institution. He is a historian adept at reading in multiple ancient and modern languages. He has written numerous books and is a recognized authority in his field. So this is not "just another story." It comes from a source of unimpeachable integrity, honesty, and historical precision.

It goes like this. One morning in August of 1980, at the age of twenty-four, Dan was making a large batch of blueberry muffins in his kitchen. He had just finished mixing the wet ingredients with a cup of honey. Honey being honey, he got some on the lip of the jar and so washed the jar off in the sink and sat it down to drip dry. He then turned to the business of the dry ingredients. Walking over to the pantry, he reached for one of those old-fashioned metal flour tins. As he pulled the tin off the shelf, it suddenly got heavier. His unprepared hands could not hold on to the new weight, and the tin dropped to the floor. Here is what happened next, in Dan's own words, which he was kind enough to share with me at my request:

> *Upon meeting the carpeted ground, the tin lost its lid and much of its powdery contents. Rather upset at myself, I kneeled to clean up the mess. Then came the electric discovery whose current still flows through me. Enough of the flour had run out to reveal that something was buried at the bottom of the tin. Naturally curious, I dug through the flour with my fingers and then pulled out, of all things, a glass honey jar exactly like the one I had held in my hands and washed a moment ago, a jar*

completely caked with flour—as if it had been placed in the tin still wet. Puzzled, I turned my head to assure myself that the bottle I had just rinsed was standing where I had left it. It was not.

Dan stared for two minutes, examining the situation and its impossibility: "The fact was obvious. The wet honey jar had been moved from the sink and deposited on the bottom of the flour tin. The explanation, however, was not at all obvious."

He went through all of the usual skeptical rebuttals: that this feat was a trick or show designed for an audience (where was the audience?); that he had somehow hypnotized himself and put a wet jar at the bottom of the flour tin himself (the latter is a nearly impossible feat he later learned—he tried); that his unconscious mind had played a trick on him and somehow traded places with his conscious mind for the duration of the experience (then how to explain the fully conscious and fully remembered sensation of the tin suddenly becoming heavier?). None of these "explanations" really resolved anything, of course. They were more unbelievable than the event itself, which was already outrageous enough.

Not that Dan had an explanation. He did not, and he still does not. When Dan told this same story to a group of us at a private academic gathering, he added his own immediate conclusion at the time of the original event. "I knew at that instant," he explained to us, "that materialism is false."

Saying Away

I like Dan's conclusion because it does not go too far. It does not overreach. Indeed, it is not a positive claim at all. Dan did not conclude, for example, that, "If this can happen, then the literal resurrection of Jesus Christ is true" (although a minister friend of his made that exact claim when Dan told him the same story). Nor did Dan conclude that, "If the honey jar can teleport, then God exists." He simply concluded that, "Materialism is false." That is a negative conclusion, not a positive one. It is about something that is not the case.

This is another one of those subtle but important points, as I think it suggests what these inexplicable events may be fundamentally about, what they "intend." What they intend, I want to suggest, is provocation, confusion, and offense. More specifically, they intend a provocation to our settled certainties of who and what we are, a confusion of our cognitive categories, and an offense to our otherwise perfectly material world. What they intend to do is *mess with us*.[70]

What they do not intend, I think, is some kind of singular interpretation. They seem intentionally open-ended and inherently plastic, as if they want to be picked up and shaped by different people and communities into different worldviews. Hence the long history of religions; our dramatically different worldviews and cultures; and our present popular folklores around flying saucers, alien implants, and UFOs.

If the latter folklores would have us "sailing away," what I am suggesting is that we instead should be *saying away*. I am suggesting that we recognize that these events and objects are designed to take things apart, really to take *us* apart, so that we can put things back together again in more creative and flourishing ways. That's really two steps or stages: *saying away* and *saying again*, if you will. I want to focus on the first of those steps here and the second in my last chapter on mythmaking. Here, then, is another tool to add to our growing collection: *comparison*, *phenomenology*, *history*, *hermeneutics*, *erotics*, and now, *saying away*.

There are many forms of saying away in contemporary thought, but the deeper roots lie in the history of comparative mystical literature. Any reader of this literature will recognize this idea of saying away immediately as a very old and powerful technique for transcending one's ego and its various cognitive and cultural constructs. Hence the famous "apophatic" theology of the Christian mystics: *apo-phasis* is a Greek technical term for "saying away," that is, taking apart anything and everything that can be said about "God" in order to arrive at a kind of dazzling, divine darkness beyond all names and forms.

Think this is a long way from Whitley Strieber's ear? Perhaps. Perhaps not. I have continuously been struck by just how often Whitley invokes classic and contemporary mystical literature in his books on the alien and the UFO. This is significant. Gurdjieff and Ouspensky are central, for

example, to his convictions around the paradoxes of "the third," the triangle, and the three or nine knock phenomenon. Another writer whom Whitley references throughout his books is Meister Eckhart. Eckhart, it turns out, was the consummate "Sayer Awayer" of medieval Christianity. He also sounds *a lot* like Whitley Strieber, or at least what Whitley would sound like were he living in medieval Germany in a Dominican monastery.

The ground of all this professor's teachings was a basic distinction that he drew between "God" and the "Godhead beyond God." "God" is the personal deity that comes into being when human beings pray, worship, and believe in Him (more or less precisely like Whitley's "communion" coelacanth). This "God," however, can always be said away, deconstructed as a historical and social construct and a psychological projection, because that is what "He" in fact is.

The Godhead, however, is no such thing. Indeed, the Godhead is no thing at all. Hence one of Eckhart's most common descriptions of this Godhead beyond God was *nicht*, or "nothing" (recall Whitley's description in chapter 5 about how Gurdjieff used very similar language in the twentieth century). By such a provocation, Eckhart did not mean "nothing" in the nihilistic sense. He meant that the Godhead was beyond space and time and so could not be identified with any single thing or act located in space and time. The Godhead is literally no-thing. He also famously referred to this nothing as the "eternal Now."

There is no ego in such an eternal Now. There is, as the professor put it, "neither Henry nor Conrad there," that is, there are no egos or personalities there. As egos, of course, as Henrys and Conrads, we can hardly understand such things. But we can well recognize the saying away that is going on here. We should not be surprised, then, when we read Eckhart begging his listeners to "take leave of God for God," that is, to abandon their simplistic and naive notions of God as an objective person "out there," so that they might experience true divinity in and as the Ground of their own souls.[71] Today we might say that we need to stop projecting the supernatural and realize it as the super natural, that is, *as us* on some deeper level than the constructed ego—as consciousness itself.

The One World

Obviously, this new practice takes away a great deal. But what does it get us? If we were to practice such a saying away, we might begin by asking which assumptions the objects-out-of-place of the present chapter—the object in Whitley's ear, the magical star stones in the shamans, and the honey jar—are saying away. I think the answer to that question is clear enough. They are saying away what Dan thought his honey jar was saying away: materialism.

It is not that materialism is wrong. It is that it is half right.

If we were *really* serious about all of this, we would not speak about a "mental world" influencing or affecting a "material world," as if these were two different, stable things. We would not speak like this because there is almost certainly only *one world*, of which our mental and material experiences are two dimensions or modes. This deeper "one world" is why material events can behave like mental events and why mental events look like material events. *Because they are*. Both have "split off" from a deeper super-reality that is both mental and material, or neither mental nor material, at the same time.[72]

This is another mind-bender (but you are probably getting used to that bending by now). How can we possibly understand it? Through a story. We grossly underestimate the power of narrative in the modern world, mistaking it mostly as pure fiction, when in actual fact narrative carries all sorts of forms of knowledge, including and especially esoteric or secret forms. Significantly, the English "to narrate" is based on a Greek root (*gno*-) that means "to know" and from which we get the word "gnosis."[73] We will return to the power of narrative or "myth" in our last chapters.

For now, consider the material of the present chapter. These sayings away are all *stories acted out in the physical world*. They are all stories that rely on objects in the physical world to tell their tales and transmit their "punch-line." Hence the crunching driveway, the people in Whitley's bedroom, the screwed-up security system, the open garage door, and the thing in his ear.

Apparently, that is what the human mind-brain does when it is participating in a dimension of reality that is quite beyond our primitive

“mental” and “material” categories of thinking (and our primitive science, which assumes the same division to work at all). It tells itself a story that involves otherwise impossible things *and then acts out that story with physical objects*. If those objects are available in the immediate environment, it uses them as props, like Dan’s honey jar. If they are not, it creates them “out of nowhere.” Hence the implant in Whitley’s ear. These are all magical objects that say away our own sensory and cognitive habits of separating “mind” and “matter” in a super natural world where no such distinctions exist.

12

Cracking the Cosmic Egg

WHITLEY

Childhood is the kingdom where nobody dies.

Edna St. Vincent Millay

As we grow older, childhood fades into a lovely, anguished distance until it remains only as glimmers of memory that probe into a world that is too unfocused for our adult minds. This is because, as familiarity with one's surroundings grows, the mind adds structure based on expectation, until at last the eyes that winked back from the raindrops of those early years and the ships that sailed the clouds are lost. When I was tiny, I used to sit in the living room in the dawn and converse with the sunlight. I had many friends in the swirling rain, and would watch Admiral Pirate fire his lightning broadsides when it stormed.

There was more, but it has been lost to me, as has the wonder of the rain and the saga of Admiral Pirate, and the sun no longer speaks to me in the language of light.

In every life, there remain sparks of wonder and visions—fleeting, perhaps—that are too eccentric to explain. We discount them, then deny them, and finally do not see them at all. But in some lives, the process of

filtration is interrupted. Things happen that are so terrible or so memorable that they do not get lost in the amnesia of childhood, but rather are tucked away in special corners of the mind, where they continue on as memories that are neglected but not forgotten.

A child who has done this may continue as an adult, and if adult perceptions are sufficiently strange, they may also enter neglected—or rejected—memory.

Hypnosis can be used to extract such memories, but it is a demanding process. Unfortunately, it is routinely carried out on "abductees" by nonprofessionals. As the objective of the subject is to please the hypnotist, even the fact that the hypnotist's beliefs are known to the subject will confuse the results. People can end up with false memories that they can never untangle. Nevertheless, in the hands of a skilled professional, hypnosis can draw neglected memories into recollection, as happened with me when I was hypnotized by Dr. Donald Klein in 1986.

Neither I nor Dr. Klein put much stock in the notion that I might have been abducted by aliens. I still don't think that the sessions I did with him necessarily suggest that. They do suggest, however, that whatever happens to me is an ongoing process and that it started in childhood. This is because, during the second session, I spontaneously regressed to the age of twelve and described seeing a room full of sleeping soldiers who were being overseen by a willowy form familiar to me from my close encounter the previous December. The childhood event happened on a train, during a trip to Wisconsin to see relatives. As author Ed Conroy described in his book about me, *Report on Communion*, a friend of mine from those days remembered me returning from the trip talking about nothing but the soldiers I had seen. During the experience, I started out by acting as a sort of guide for my father, telling him that everything was all right. I was familiar with the willowy figure. I'd been with her before. But then he said, "No Whitty, it's not all right," and a wave of terror passed through me. I saw the strangeness, then. I saw the improbability. And the memory—along with others that I was probably aware of then—got passed into the region of neglect, not to resurface again for more than thirty years.

To me, the figure minding the soldiers was not dangerous. My father's fear is what changed that, and conceivably led to the amnesia that set in afterward.

To this day, I really cannot be sure what my childhood memories are, this one included. It is difficult to believe that what I remember of them now, as I described in *The Secret School*, happened in an absolute, literal sense. But something unusual happened, otherwise I don't think that they would be in my mind at all.

It may not have had anything to do with strange creatures, though. What if something else happened on that train, something perhaps that is part of a pattern so shocking that I cannot face it directly even now and have transferred it into this strange memory in order to protect myself from what my unconscious mind regards as an unbearable truth?

In his 1990 study of close encounter witnesses and near-death experiencers that led to his book *The Omega Project,* Dr. Kenneth Ring found among the close encounter witnesses one consistent result: the majority of them reported childhood trauma of some sort.

If this finding is correct, it could be that there is some sort of process of sublimation involved in transferring unacceptable and incomprehensible memories to more bearable fantasies. A brutal rape by a beloved parent might become a brutal alien abduction, as the mind seizes on the most believable and acceptable alternative in order to avoid facing what it cannot bear to see. This might explain, at least in part, the proliferation of close encounter memories, including some of my own. I doubt that it explains them all, but that possibility shouldn't be discounted, either. If such a process exists now, it is likely that it has always existed and might well be one of the primary generators of folklore. A rape by a father becomes a visit from a god. Leda didn't get ravished by daddy—too unbearable to contemplate. No, it was a swan, and that swan was a god.

This might explain many of these experiences, but it should not be used to explain them away. The shattering of expectation that accompanies trauma doesn't just cause transference, it opens a door. When a child finds that he cannot trust a parent, the child becomes hyper-vigilant, and the sense of mistrust radiates out from that foundational wound until the child's connection with reality becomes unsettled. It is then that the eyes reappear, staring—now with malevolence—out of the raindrops, and, in some cases, the developing close-encounter folklore replaces Leda's swan with a sullen reptilian alien or an owl-eyed gray.

The world whispers a devastating message to the sufferer: “I am not what I seem . . . and neither are you.”

I have heard that whisper, and believe me, soft as it is, it is capable of searing the soul forever.

To this day my relationship to reality is edged by a region of ambiguity. Over the years, I have become able to address it in various ways. It is here that the faces in the raindrops command my attention. However, my life experience suggests to me that they may turn out not to inhabit only the raindrops of imagination, but conceivably to be reflections of another reality altogether.

Or so I think—and, I believe, have good reason to do so. As I have said, my perception is that our physical reality is embedded in something larger—an island, as it were, alone in a vast ocean, the nature of which we have thus far only guessed at. Instead of taking an objective look at phenomena that cannot be explained, we have thus far across our history contented ourselves with either accepting them or rejecting them. Personally, I find a more inclusive and questioning approach more interesting and intellectually useful, and also capable of offering the culture some advancement in the clarity of its vision of reality, rather than a continuation of the confusion that has dogged us since well before Leda was raped by Zeus.

If that larger world doesn’t exist, then what is an inexplicable object doing implanted in my ear, and why are so many other people similarly implanted? I agree with Jeff that these are probably not tracking devices. I also stand by the idea that somebody was there. They had to be. I saw two of them. Outside, I heard others. They were people, but possessed of technologies far beyond anything known and using tools that seem almost incomprehensible, such as magnetic fields that persist even in the absence of a source.

They came out of the shadow-line that edges my life. When they returned to it, they left behind, in addition to the implant, the electromagnetic disturbances that I have described. On the other side of the line, they may or may not have been physical, but when they entered my bedroom, they were, and they brought with them a physical object that once yielded some very mysterious information. If I could be assured of an objective analysis of the object and of my own safety in having it removed,

I might try that again. But it's a hard thing to face. It has now been there for years without hurting me. Would taking it out do the opposite?

Perhaps one day when I feel ready to take the risk, I'll try it. But that won't be easy.

The disturbance to expectation that has followed me across my life began, quite literally, with birth. I have never had a chance to experience an assured sense of reality, and perhaps this is why I am so open to intrusions from beyond the edge of expectation.

When I was born, I am told that my mother could not make milk. Unfortunately, I was not able to tolerate the primitive formulas of the 1940s, and lived in agony for my first six months. After enduring a twenty-hour labor, my mother had to take home a baby who did not and could not stop screaming, not for days, weeks, finally months. I was either in exhausted sleep or in agony. She herself became so exhausted that she ended up in a nursing home for the second six months of my life. At some point, I was apparently dropped on my head, with the result that there is a spinal compression in my neck that is the source of the pain I have experienced ever since.

Once I began to eat solid food, things settled down somewhat. Until, that is, I reached the age of six or seven. As I recorded in *Solving the Communion Enigma,* I ended up in some sort of program that I believe to have been carried out at Randolph Air Force Base near San Antonio. My primary recollection is of being jammed with other children into a dark space—a box—where horrific, deafening sounds were played. I remember it as shrill screaming that made us scream, also, as we twisted and struggled.

Now, these memories did not really focus until a few years ago, after Anne and I moved back to San Antonio. To my surprise one afternoon while driving home on I35 north of the city, I wound up at Randolph's south gate. I had no idea how or why I had driven there. After that, I found myself visiting certain memories that had always been with me, but which I had been neglecting in the same way that a stroke victim's brain might neglect a paralyzed limb. The surprise detour to Randolph restored my interest in them, and I have been thinking about them and researching them ever since.

I know that there was a program for bright children at Randolph because one of my oldest friends, now a distinguished academician, was

present when a couple from the air force attempted to recruit him for it when he was a child. When a Skinner box was mentioned, his parents declined. Skinner boxes are used to study animal behavior, and the idea of using them with children did not sit well with these very aware parents. They knew that, whatever this program was about, something was seriously wrong with it. I surely do remember that box, though. In fact, it's my most vivid memory of the whole wretched business, and it was extremely dreadful.

So I think that the program existed. I also know that it stressed me severely, because my immune system collapsed when I was in it, at age seven. My report card from the period shows weeks of absences, which was the time that I was kept in isolation.

Looking back at the program now, it seems to me that the stress involved had the effect of cracking the cosmic egg, just like, say, sexual abuse. Perhaps even more completely.

I think that the program was run by German scientists who had been brought to the United States as part of Operation Paperclip. They had worked in human behavior in the concentration camps. Could it be that they discovered that by stressing children to extremes, the children would not always go mad or die, but would sometimes become conduits to some other way of addressing reality? To me, the tightly packed bodies and the screaming amount to an excellent simulation of the interior of a gas chamber, pitch dark, packed solid with humanity, and thick with terror.

Did some children sometimes survive the gassings—buried, perhaps, under heaps of bodies—and emerge from the ordeal with strange knowledge and strange powers? Were the Nazi scientists trying to re-create these conditions in their lab in Texas?

If so, perhaps it sometimes works. My life would certainly suggest so. When I was twelve, we began noticing that white owl standing at the far edge of our backyard. It seemed to be watching my windows. This disturbed my parents so much that they had my screens nailed shut. It was also my first exposure to a creature that would come to emblemize my whole relationship to that aspect of being that I call the visitors.

Later, in 1968, I had a profoundly unsettling experience involving an owl. That year, I was living in London and attending the London School of Film Technique, now called the London Film School. During the summer

break, I decided to travel on the Continent. On an overnight train to Florence, I fell in with a girl. We began traveling together. For a couple of weeks in Florence, we had a lovely time, living together in chaste intimacy. But then we went on to Rome, and when we toured St. Peter's, she became crazy, stalking through the church in raging silence. She scared me. I was living with her in a small *pensione* near the railroad station. I decided, "No more," and headed off to the *pensione* to collect my suitcase and get out of there.

I went into our tiny room, threw my toothbrush into my suitcase, and started to leave. Then I stopped. Her suitcase was lying on the foot of the bed. I have always been a bit too curious, and I opened it. What I saw shocked me to my core. In it was a nun's habit and, lying beside it, a dry, flattened owl carcass.

I didn't get off the train again until I was in Strasbourg.

The owls were gathering.

My first memories of my December 1985 experience involved an owl. I thought I'd seen one peering in the bedroom window, then flying around in the house. But it was winter, all the windows were closed and we had no chimney, so it wasn't possible that an owl could have gotten in.

Our dark god, it would seem, isn't a swan but an owl, and therein lies, I suspect, a fundamental revelation about how exactly what is touching us wishes us to understand our relationship with it, or, conversely, how we wish to interact with it.

As I write this, both Jeff Kripal and our editor at Tarcher/Penguin, Mitch Horowitz, are having owl imagery enter their lives. Mitch has been having unexpected encounters with them for about a year. And, of course, the owl is the mascot at Jeff's university. In Celtic myth, the owl is a symbol of the otherworld, and in the UFO literature, a sign of the gray visitors.

Like owls, our visitors are creatures of the night. They are predators, silent, appearing suddenly and stealing people away for unknown reasons. The owl captures the unwary, the rat who dares to cross a wire in the moonlight, the chipmunk scuttling in the last sun, the famished rabbit daring the gray of dawn.

At our old cabin, as night gathered, the owls would often come, standing in the trees around the house, sometimes capturing prey right

before our eyes. After Anne began analyzing our reader mail, it became clear that we were not the only close encounter witnesses who had owls in their lives.

I was fascinated by this phenomenon, and sensed at the time that it could be seen not simply as a sort of eerie mystery, but much more richly, as language.

To do this, it is first necessary to withdraw from the issue of who is speaking, and rather concentrate on what is being said. Otherwise, we'll be stopped before we start, because there is no way to be certain why this happens—that is to say, who is speaking. This is the approach we've been taking since the beginning of the human experience. Over this time we have made thousands of decisions about which animal, which tree, which stone belongs to what god, and what the relationship means. Most recently, we would say that the appearance of owls in the context of close encounters is meaningless, because close encounter is itself a trivial folklore.

Looking at history, though, it is perhaps unwise to dismiss folklore. It does have a habit of transforming into belief systems, and we humans have trouble handling our beliefs. We kill for them.

Among close encounter witnesses, owls are believed to be "screen memories," that is to say, memories of something ordinary that cloaks what was actually there, which was much stranger. This is not quite the same as Freud's use, wherein real memories are used to screen deeper, unwanted ones. In this case, the screen memories are not real, but fabrications perhaps introduced into the mind of the witness by hypnosis.

When witnesses find owls watching their houses, as we did, they will often think that the visitors are using the owls like cameras. More interestingly to me, people will identify the owl as the totem animal of the visitors.

In all of this, I hear language. Back when we lived in the woods, I understood that the visitors were potentially dangerous. The owl image spoke to me in two ways: it warned of a stealthy predator, and it promised wisdom.

The question was how to take the wisdom without being eaten? I decided to use the same language I was seeing to reply with my own visual statement. Knowing that I was looking at a predator, I nevertheless went out into the woods, went deep, seeking to be helpless in the dark. By this time, I

had seen into their eyes and seen the danger there. I knew that I'd been raped, that semen had been taken from my body, and with it the essence of my life and the potential for a new child destined to rise up among them, a thought which haunts me to this day.

If this all rests somehow in physical reality, was that child made? What has been his or her experience? Have I given my seed to the stars, or given a lamb to the slaughter?

To lie in the lap of the goddess is to be unsure, and in that unsureness there is extraordinary suffering.

The worst part of it was that they would only rarely and briefly come to me on my terms. As hard as those night journeys were—intentionally exposing myself in the moonlight, something no smart rat would ever do—the hardest part was the way the visitors usually withheld themselves. I went, I waited in agonized vulnerability, I returned home, knocked back a stiff drink, and turned in.

Was I not succulent enough? Too dry? Tasted too much like chicken? Or was it that I was doing what I hoped I was doing, which was surrendering myself to them—asking, I hoped, for a relationship?

That is what I got, and it has remained so for the rest of my life, and if we continue to be in some way intact after death, it will, I feel certain, develop even more richly then.

Richly, yes, but also dangerously, and that is a great part of the point, the second most important word in the sentence: it has ever been essential to finding one's truth that one tempt death. This is a central feature of initiation. Even in modern times, in Masonry, there is a symbolic death to the past self. In ancient Greece, the Eleusinian Mysteries involved a reenactment of the abduction of Persephone and her descent into the underworld.

To enter death. To gaze into the mirror of mortality. To find the truth that is beyond articulation, and yet is the final word in this very old and very new language. Old, because it dates so far back in human ritual, new because its power to transform has to this day never been methodically explored.

Perhaps that will change soon, because if this owl should ever take flight in our general night, we will find ourselves face-to-face with a truly remarkable predator, who will educate us if we face her, but steal us away if

we run. But, of course, there was a secret revealed in the Eleusinian Mysteries, as there is in all shamanic initiation. It is that death is not what it seems; it is a change of direction, not the end of existence.

But release does not come easily. Suffering is the engine of transcendence. Osiris cut to pieces. Job in his abnegation, even so grateful to his god. Jesus forsaken on his cross. Humanity on a dying planet, lifting desperate eyes to the cold stars. Make no mistake, the entire species is probably headed toward suffering just as great as that of the avatars of the past, but on a truly fantastic scale.

In that night, the owl, bringer of death and wisdom, will potentially reign as silent mistress of our souls. Like the old song, but perhaps with a somewhat different tone, she will have the whole world in her hands.

I cannot tell how dangerous it really was, but I can share the peace my life as her student has brought me. I have threaded the maze of my own suffering, Ariadne's follower, to a place in the heart that I had never known existed, where compassion floods for my fellow man, for Earth and her creatures, even for my own slouching struggle in the darkness.

In my foreword to Jacques Vallee's book *Dimensions: A Casebook of Alien Contact,* I offered the opinion that the pressure of the close encounter experience is what the force of evolution looks like when it is applied to a conscious mind. So the owl, flying through the mystery of the experience, brings with the danger of her talons and her tearing beak also the revelatory reflection in her fearsome eyes.

When I said in *Communion* that "the human mind winks back from the dark," I was addressing both the evolutionary power and ambiguity that emerges into our lives when we see past the expectations and assumptions with which we surround ourselves. We see into a darkness that, in my experience, is at once "us" as we truly are and the "other" in all its mystery. The crack in the cosmic egg is not just a crack in the mirror of self, but a shattering of that mirror. And beyond self, joy.

13

Trauma, Trance, and Transcendence

JEFF

No creatures can reach God in their capacity of created things, and what is created must be broken for the good to come out. The shell must be broken for the kernel to come out.

Meister Eckhart, Sermon Twenty-Four

Any adequate modeling of super natural experiences like those of Whitley must not only throw light on these experiences. It must also explain why the rest of us do *not* have these experiences. The model must explain both the experiencer and the nonexperiencer, both the believer and the doubter. Put a bit differently, any model of the super natural must not just explain the rare experiences of the super. It must also explain the vastly more common experience of the simply natural.

This is where what I call *the traumatic secret* comes in. The phrase "the traumatic secret" is a poetic expression for another tool or technique for our toolbox. In truth, this tool, like the notion of an *erotics*, is really not a single tool. It is more like one of those Swiss army knives. It is (at least) three tools in one. The phrase encodes three separate but related notions: trauma, trance, and transcendence, each of which we will treat below. So now we have seven basic tools or techniques to make sense of the

unexplainable: *comparison*, *phenomenology*, *history*, *hermeneutics*, *erotics*, *saying away*, and *the traumatic secret*.

At its most basic, the traumatic secret is a function of the reduction model of the mind-brain relation that we looked at in chapter 3 under "Producer or Reducer?" This model, recall, suggests that the human body-brain does not produce consciousness but *reduces* it. The body-brain crafts consciousness into a human form though a vast network of highly evolved biology, neurology, culture, language, family, and social interactions until a more or less stable ego or "I" emerges, rather like the way the software and hardware of your laptop can pick up a Wi-Fi signal and translate the Internet into the specificities of your screen and social media. The analogy is a rough and imperfect one, but it gets the basic point across.

Sometimes, however, the reducer is compromised or temporarily suppressed. The filtering or reduction of consciousness does not quite work, and other forms of mind or dimensions of consciousness, perhaps even other species or forms of life, that are normally shut out now "pop in." In extreme cases, it may seem that the cosmos itself has suddenly come alive and is *all* there. Perhaps it is.

In any case, such a model would certainly explain quite easily why experiences of the super natural world so often occur in or around trauma, illness, suffering, and death (all situations in which the brain-filter is compromised or suppressed). It would also explain why telepathy ends with "pathos"—deep suffering is precisely what it often takes to spark a telepathic communication between two emotionally entangled loved ones. It would also explain why the rest of us commonly experience only a natural world: our evolved systems have not yet been compromised or breached. That is not a bad thing, of course. It is simply what bodies, cultures, and egos do, and must do. They filter most of mind out so that we can be our little social selves, so that we can be us.

Trance-Formations

There are other safer and gentler ways to let a little more of mind in, however. One of the oldest and most common ways can be captured in a single word: trance. Trance induction is probably humanity's oldest

technique for "hearing the gods," that is, for accessing altered states of consciousness and activating special powers—what Charles Fort called wild talents and today we call human potentials.[74] Trance induction has also long been the privileged method for the production and establishment of new cultural narratives, otherwise known as revelations, myths, and religions.

Historically speaking, the shamans, bards, sages, prophets, seers, and poets were the trance experts who "knew" the secret truths, "heard" the revelation, or "saw" the gods of the culture. It was the same religious prodigies who could pass all of this on in poetic speech, which was then, generally much later, set down in writing. These trance-seers and trance-speakers were the original "novelists" or Writers of the New. Little wonder, then, that today trance states and new cultural narratives arise anew among professional writers, poets, and channelers. Little wonder, too, that we can detect profound comparative resonances between a figure like Whitley Strieber and the folklore of shamanism and the history of religions.

It takes more than trance states and writers to make a religion, of course. Political powers, religious elites, artists, and architects must all take up elements of these states and stories and create stable social institutions and the elaborate theater of ritual, art, and architecture around them. Entire communities must then reenact these "revealed" stories over and over again until their narratives and images seem eminently obvious and real to a majority of the people.

This is where it gets "loopy." These same repeated rituals and reenacted stories are in turn designed to induce mild trance states in their participants in order to "return" them to the events of the myth—to establish them as characters in the sacred story of the culture. Every believer who becomes absorbed in the reading of a scriptural text, meditates on a religious image, chants a sacred name over and over again, or deeply engages in a repetitive ritual is, in effect, self-hypnotizing and attempting, through that same trance induction, to "remember" an original revelation, founding narrative, or beloved deity. By doing so, she or he is psychically entering and *becoming that story*. The story once born in trance and then shaped by society is now being told again within another trance induction.

Put most simply, *the religious self is a story*. And trance induction, as the original ecstasy of a religious prodigy or the repeated ritual of the devout community, is all about hearing and seeing this story, becoming this story, remembering it, and transmitting it to others as the way things really and truly are. They never quite are, of course.

More to my present point, *the reading self is also a trance-induced story*. If you are absorbed in this book at this moment, you are in a mild trance state answering to the trance states that Whitley Strieber and Jeff Kripal entered in order to write these pages. You are a slightly different person reading this book, just as we were slightly different people writing it. Or maybe we are all really different people because of this trance state, itself designed to snap us all out of our story-trances so that we can tell better ones. We did promise to end the world in our first lines. We promised an apocalypse of thought.

End of the world or no, there is no doubt about it: writing and reading are trance inductions. As my colleague in the study of Indian religions Lee Siegel has so eloquently put it in his recent book on mesmerism in colonial India: "the relationship between a reader and listener is analogous to that between a hypnotist and subject." And hypnosis is, "by its very nature, about the power of stories."[75]

In order to capture something of this, Lee invents an entire minivocabulary of new trance words: "in[tro]duction," "trance-formations," "trance-mutations," "trance-actions," and "trance-migrations" (the latter for the hypnotically induced remembrance of previous lives that is so central to the doctrine of reincarnation in India). His point? That nearly everything we think, feel, desire, and do, that nearly everything we *are*—from our romantic relationships to our ethnic, national, and religious identities—is a result of some kind of trance induction; that culture entrances us, makes us believe all sorts of things about the self, society, and the world that are useful enough but are not necessarily true.

Think this is all irrelevant here?

"Look into my eyes," says the hypnotist. One of the most obvious features of *Communion* is its astonishing cover, carefully designed by Whitley himself with the artist Ted Jacobs. The central features of that original painted cover, of course, are the alien being's immense black eyes,

at once subtly mirroring the viewer and pulling him or her in, like a two-way mirror. No iconic feature of the book played a more important role in its reception history and in the hundreds of thousands of letters that the Striebers received. Readers were hypnotized. Entranced.

Moreover, the book itself dwells long and carefully on four trance narratives, each transcribed from a hypnosis session with a professional psychiatrist: two of Whitley's with Dr. Donald Klein, and two of Anne's with Dr. Robert Naiman. Whitley refers to these trance sessions in the previous chapter, but it is worth underlining here: *Communion* is a trance-text, a "remembrance" of a literally hypnotic story that helped "reveal" and then establish one of the most powerful cultural narratives working in American culture today.

The fact that this cultural narrative has been operating largely "in secret," that is, in the bedrooms, bodies, and private psyches of countless human beings well outside the approval of the gatekeepers of the culture does nothing to lessen the story's power and influence. Indeed, it may well increase both. As Jacques Vallee has taught us in his own books, if a form of mind wanted to really influence, shape, or direct a culture, it would not bother with the culture's public arguments or politics. It would choose to work on the culture's deepest operating system. It would go to the place of dreams and vision. It would choose to work on the cultural imagination.

Trance-scendence

What I am asking you to consider here may initially seem like an especially tough message. On one level, I suppose it is. I am asking you to consider the possibilities that both society and the self are stories, trance-formations generated through the hypnotic inductions of language and social scripts, and that every culture and religion is fundamentally an illusion. I am asking you *to wake up*.

But here is the thing. Here is where it gets really interesting. Once we wake up out of our respective psychological and social trances and recognize, as if emerging out of a long dream, that all of our cherished cultural and religious convictions are illusory trance-formations, just *who* has realized this? Who has woken up out of these trance inductions?

Consider the story of Haeyoung Seong. Seong lives and teaches in Seoul, South Korea. He was my first Ph.D. student. One day in 1984, Seong was staring out a window in a high school classroom, watching the sun dance off of a white building. The movement of the light did something to him. Hypnotized him? What does that mean? In his case, it meant that he felt his body fill up with thousands of intensely pleasurable, hot "energy worms" before "It" happened.

"It" was some vast supermind, infinite and eternal, beyond space and time, and utterly indifferent to the insignificant human ego. The event shattered him, which is to say: ended all of his trances. The trances returned, of course. Fourteen years would pass before he found any adequate resonances to what he had known that day, first in William James's classic study of mystical experiences, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, then in the *nous* or "cosmic intellect" of the third-century Greek philosopher Plotinus, who, Seong concluded, had known a near identical state of mind seventeen centuries before him.

Something eerily similar happened to a German Lutheran shoe cobbler by the name of Jacob Boehme in the year 1600. Jacob was staring at a beam of sunlight bouncing off a pewter dish. He developed a mind-bogglingly elaborate symbolism and philosophy to explain what had been revealed to him in the light, much of which was deemed heretical and dangerous by the local religious authorities. Regardless, what happened to Jacob initiated an entire lineage of Western esoteric thought that influenced artists and philosophers like Emanuel Swedenborg, William Blake, Samuel Coleridge, and G. F. W. Hegel, a "thinker of the third" if ever there was one. Hegel famously called Jacob the "first German philosopher."

Then there was the American science-fiction writer Philip K. Dick. The cultural and psychological contexts—that is, the filter, medium, or prism—could not have been any more different, but there was the reflected light again. On February 20, 1974, the author was staring at a young woman's golden Christian fish-sign necklace. She had come to the door to deliver some pain medication for an oral surgery. The golden necklace glittering in the sun was his pewter dish. "It" rushed in again.

What happened to Dick in the next few hours, days, and weeks changed his life and resulted in his last three novels, all of which orbited around what he came to conclude was a cosmic mind that had

reprogrammed him in and through that same mysterious light. It also did very practical things, like enable him to clairvoyantly diagnose an invisible hernia in his young son, a diagnosis which led to an emergency surgery. Dick called this cosmic mind "Valis," for Vast Active Living Intelligence System. His experience of it was *so* physical, *so* palpably electromagnetic, *so* real that Phil seriously thought that Valis was the beam of some alien technology or satellite in the sky before he concluded that it was more likely something else: a superintelligent plasma that underlies and underwrites everything, which the ancients had called the Logos, that is, the Mind or Word of God.

My point? That trance states, even and especially those induced casually and unconsciously by white buildings, pewter dishes, and gold necklaces, do not always lead to more illusion and more projection. Sometimes, for reasons that we do not understand, they appear to do the exact opposite. They appear to outshine, to *end* the consensual trances of society and self. They catalyze remarkable states of mind and being that look very similar across the ages, states that may well tell us something important about who and what we really are. Sometimes, it turns out, the black reflective surface of the alien's eyes just disappears and one finds oneself *inside*.

I do not think that whatever Seong was hypnotized into was illusory. No doubt some of the visionary features of his experience, like those of Jacob and Phil, were functions of his cultural imagination. The light is *always* refracted, *always* reflected through culture and psychology. It can be no other way, since as social egos we ourselves *are* those mediums, filters, or prisms. We *are* that two-way mirror.

But I doubt very much that the basic message of Seong's experience was illusory or false. Nor do I think that that cosmic *nous* he knew had anything to do with the illusions of culture, religion, or even history. This is why Seong could find a description of a near identical state in a third-century Greek philosopher. We might add another trance word to Lee Siegel's new language, then, and begin to speak of "trance-scendence." Sometimes, rarely but really, the trick of trance states leads out of the consensual trance of culture and religion into something other or more, something so other that it feels and seems *alien*.

That's because it is. It is not us, not us as rational social egos anyway. And yet it *is* us, as soul, as spirit, as Valis. Again, allow me to repeat myself. The problem here is a very simple one: As knowing subjects, we are not one but two. Until we recognize the Human as Two, we will not be able to see and accept the illusory nature of our little selves, our little cultures, and our little religions. Nor will we be able to recognize the cosmic vastness of who we really are. Consciousness is *not* ego. Consciousness is *not* culture. And yet no ego or culture can exist without "It."

I confess. This central notion of the Human as Two makes sense of pretty much everything for me. It explains why the skeptics are so honestly and understandably skeptical (their egos or consensual trances have not yet been invaded or broken). It explains the utter convictions of the mystics, poets, and modern-day abductees (their egos or consensual trances have been invaded and broken). It also explains the necessity of the imagination as a translator or medium between these two forms of mind. It explains the various paradoxes we see again and again in the descriptions of these astonishing states of mind: how such a Mind is, and is not, us. Finally, it helps us to come to moral terms with what we see in the history of religions when we look closely enough and without blinking. What we see is death and transformation. What we see is trauma and transcendence.

Trauma and Transcendence

There are many ways to realize the Human as Two. There are many ways to "die" and be "resurrected," to realize, as it were, *both* our own humanity *and* our own divinity. The problem is that none of these ways are quite reliable, and some of them are extremely dangerous and destructive, if not actually and literally deadly.

Whitley again recognizes all of this in his previous chapter. He understands perfectly well that trauma is often a catalyst for later visionary events. He also does not flinch from the common sexual dimensions of these traumas, even their horrific nature in childhood sexual abuse. Hence brave lines like these: "If such a process exists now, it is likely that it has always existed and might well be one of the primary generators of folklore.

A rape by a father becomes a visit from a god. Leda didn't get ravished by daddy—too unbearable to contemplate. No, it was a swan."

Whitley also recognizes the classic *religious* dimensions of trauma and trance-formation. Hence lines like this one: "it has ever been essential to finding one's truth that one tempt death. This is a central feature of initiation." We are on some *very* traditional ground here, even if it has all been recast in contemporary and more accessible terms.

Most important of all, though, Whitley recognizes very clearly that trance and trauma do not just lead to illusion and suffering. In rare cases, they can also lead to transcendence, hence the "new birth" after the "death" of an initiation ritual.

This linkage between trauma and transcendence is actually a long-standing conversation between the two of us. Hence his response to what I have elsewhere called the traumatic secret in lines like these: "This might explain many of these experiences, but it should not be used to explain them away. The shattering of expectation that accompanies trauma doesn't just cause transference, it opens a door."[76]

The most striking example of this door of trauma opening out onto some form of transcendence is Whitley's suggestion in the last chapter that the physical and psychological traumas that he apparently endured on the air force base outside of San Antonio as a young boy may have been engineered by German scientists, who in turn may have stumbled on this possibility through their gruesome observations of accidental survivors of their sinister gas chambers and death camps back in Nazi Germany. This is an especially poignant and difficult suggestion.

But it is hardly beyond the realm of possibility. Astonishingly, a very similar scene to the one Whitley has imagined here—that is, one involving a pile of slain bodies with a single individual with special powers emerging from its traumatic debris—occurs in the West's oldest account of a "near-death" experience: the story of Er as told by Plato in the fourth century BCE in his famous treatise on political philosophy, *The Republic*.

Er was a warrior apparently killed on the battlefield. His body was dumped onto a pile of rotting corpses ten days after the battle. Two days later, the bodies are about to be burned on a pyre when Er revives and tells a remarkable story involving a journey to the other world, the nature of death,

the moral mechanisms of reincarnation, and the purpose of life itself, including why we do not remember our previous lives and how and why we take on the bodies we do (basically, a kind of ancient Greek karma theory). Plato is very clear about what he thinks Er's story means and why it is so important: because it teaches us that the soul is immortal, and that we should take care to live well and rightly, so that our future lives will be better ones.

Er's story is usually described as the "myth of Er," as if Plato made it all up for some abstract philosophical lesson. Maybe. Maybe not.

I mention all of this not to distract the discussion at hand but to focus it, and to help us come to terms with the otherwise confusing ways that extraordinary human experiences often occur in the most destructive and dangerous of contexts. None of this is meant to romanticize the evils of Nazism, of war, or of the horrible sufferings of trauma and sexual trauma in their countless destructive and debilitating forms. It is simply to observe that human beings sometimes have profound spiritual experiences amid or after suffering and death, and that trauma sometimes opens up into transcendence. Is this really so difficult to understand?

The Original Superman Saves a Life

I have long argued that paranormal experiences are often connected to reading events, and that paranormal phenomena somehow shape themselves into a kind of symbolic language that wants to be read and interpreted. Whitley had this just right in chapter 4 when he proposed "to see the actions of our visitors as a sort of illustrative language, communication built out of images and events." Or again, when he wrote this: "There can be little question but that there is a structure, large in scale and intellectually dynamic, that gives form to the whole phenomenon, including UFO sightings, alien encounters, encounters with the dead—all of it." I have suggested, in effect, that we are at once the writers and readers of these illustrative languages, these living graphic novels, these eerie texts and secret structures; that, somehow, some very big part of us is speaking to a little part of us at these moments—maddeningly, in code. This, of course, is

why we cannot escape hermeneutics, that trippy art of interpreting ourselves into being.

Whitley captures this idea perfectly (and much more clearly) when he writes about his uncanny owl encounters: "I was fascinated by this phenomenon, and sensed at the time that it could be seen not simply as a sort of eerie mystery, but much more richly, as language."

There is another way of saying this. The paranormal *is* a kind of reading. Which, of course, means that reading might catalyze or become a paranormal event. Here is another kind of "flip." I really believe this. I am not exaggerating in the least. Forget Professor Xavier's cool Cerebro room. Forget Superman's icy Fortress of Solitude. Reading and writing are the most powerful paranormal technologies that we possess, if only we knew what and how to read.

I also write a good deal about the paranormal experiences of professional writers and readers. Not surprisingly, people come to study with me who have known similar things and are trying to make some sense out of them. Most of my graduate students are such "mutants." Consider James. James's story illustrates in living color all of the themes of the present chapter: trauma, trance, transcendence, and, yes, the paranormal powers of reading.

James was a troubled west Texas teenager. He had been removed from "Satan's public school system" and educated on things like creationist biology. Torn by excruciating sexual guilt ("I couldn't look at women without sinning anymore"), he had held a butcher knife to his wrist more than once. But he never quite had the courage.

But today was different. Today his parents were gone, and they had left the key to the gun safe unattended. James was out driving in some kind of weird trance. In his own words, he "Ouija drove" to Barnes & Noble, a "worldly" bookstore that was definitely off-limits, forbidden. He walked in, still in a trance state above it all, in some kind of odd transcendence, split in two, as it were: "Everything was a thousand miles away. I was a thousand miles away from myself. I watched myself walk a direct path through a library's worth of books I had never seen before without hesitation. Not a glance side to side, no checking of signs."

Then it happened. *Plop*, and 312 pages of a cheap paperback book fell at his feet. He was "back into meat-space." He came to. The spell was

broken. The book on the floor was Friedrich Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. It had fallen from a shelf marked "Philosophy," a word he had never heard of until that moment. He looked around to see who might have knocked it off the shelf. No one. Then suddenly, a "hauntingly beautiful blonde in her late teens dressed in a dangerously short black dress" appeared at a distance, giggled, looked him right in the eyes, and began snapping pictures of him holding the book before she literally dashed out of the bookstore.

Thus Spoke Zarathustra. This is the book in which the German philosopher announces the coming of the "Superman" (way before the guy in blue and red tights), the *Übermensch* who he believed represented the future of humanity. Drawing loosely on Darwin, Nietzsche imagined our present humanity as a taut rope stretched between the ape and the future Superman. We can no more understand our own future nature than the ape can understand ours (another earth-farm or cat-in-the-library analogy). Nevertheless, we are in process. We are on the rope. We are evolving. And we will eventually be something else.

James took the magical book home and read its first section with his father's Colt pistol in his lap. "It was the antidote to a lifetime of poison I hadn't known I was drinking." He put the pistol away and walked outside in a Texas downpour. "I stared up at the stars between the clouds and laughed. A divine laughter, an ecstatic laughter while the rain poured down. It was the greatest moment I had ever experienced. When my sides ached and the rain abated, I walked back inside, dried off and read the rest of the book."

Nietzsche and his Superman saved James, they and the gorgeous girl dressed in black. This is what the trance state, the Ouija driving, the guided walking through the bookstore was all about. There was trauma (the suffering and contemplated suicide). There was trance (the Ouija driving and trance walking). There was a humble form of transcendence ("Everything was a thousand miles away"). And there was, of course, reading (the bookstore and subsequent reading with the pistol).

James is still reading. He would go on and major in philosophy in college. He wrote his senior thesis on Nietzsche. He is now working toward a dissertation on occult supermen in early twentieth-century esoteric movements. He first told me this story in a research paper that he wrote for a graduate class I taught on the paranormal and popular culture. I asked him

what he thought really happened. He thought what I thought: that "he" somehow did all of this. Well, both of him. That his mind, at once tortured and supercharged by his teenage crisis, literally pulled the book off the shelf and threw it at his feet.

Or did he reach up with his hand, still in a trance, and knock exactly the right book off the right shelf onto the floor, without remembering any of this? James doesn't think so. It is remotely possible, he admits, but highly unlikely and certainly not part of his experience. But, really, is such a scenario any less unbelievable? Okay, maybe a little.

Whatever happened, it happened off-line in an "unconscious," or superconscious, way. James as ego did nothing. But some greater presence within him, or acting through him, exploded into action. A supermind intervened through a trauma and a trance.

That and the Girl in Black. Who was she?

On Fear and Ecstasy One Last Time

There is one more thing to say here. It goes back to a conversation I had a few years ago not with Whitley, but with Anne. We were preparing for a radio show and discussing the confusing double nature of abduction experiences, that is, how they can be extremely positive or extremely negative, or both at the same time. After explaining the dual nature of the sacred in the history of religions, I shared with Anne my best guess about why some individuals experience a contact with the sacred as ecstatic and transformative, whereas others experience a contact with the sacred as terrifying and destructive.

It is only a thought. I do not know. I want to be very humble here and stress the complexities, not wish them away with a set of simplicities.[77] Still, here is the thought. What I expressed to Anne is that this strange both-and may be largely a function of the human ego and whether a particular ego is ready to let go of itself. If the ego is ready to let go, then it will be more likely to experience an encounter with the sacred Alien or Other as extremely positive, as redemptive, as ecstatic. If, on the other hand, the ego is not ready to let go of itself, then it will be more likely to experience an

encounter with the sacred as extremely negative, as terrifying, as destructive. In this model at least, the demon is a projection of our fears, the angel of our nature beyond those fears. The same ego, of course, can move through different stages, with an initial terror morphing into a loving communion. This is how I read *Communion* and, indeed, the entire trajectory of Whitley's mystical life.

After I explained all of this to Anne, she expressed to me over the phone a genuine aha! moment. It made sense to her, and for the first time, I gathered. I never forgot that simple but profound conversation, not only because of Anne's warm response, but also because it helped me come to terms with my own thinking. Sometimes one does not know what one thinks until one explains it to another. Whitley expresses the same exact double insight, in more poetic or symbolic terms now, when he writes in an earlier chapter of the female owl of Athena, "who will educate us if we face her, but steal us away if we run."

Again, that seems exactly right to me. It is up to us whether we face her or run, whether we will be her students or her prey.

14

Haunted

WHITLEY

In 2006, the British Ministry of Defense released a previously classified 408-page document sardonically named "the Condign Report," the title a play on that of Project Blue Book's Condon Report. The Condon Report had concluded that the U.S. Air Force had no reason to pursue investigations of unidentified flying objects, there being no apparent military reason to do so. The Condign Report concurred, as it also states that there is no evidence of any military threat. But the executive summary of the Condon report essentially says that the phenomenon offers nothing to study. Not so the Condign Report. In its executive summary, there appears the statement that what it calls unidentified aerial phenomena "are comprised of rarely encountered natural events."

Natural events can be studied, and clearly given the cultural impact of these, they should be. And yet, there is resistance from the scientific culture, the government, and the granting community to even begin to do this. Much official information, if John Podesta is to be believed, is classified. But if they are natural events and have no military significance, why is it that this classification even exists? Why was the Condign Report, for example, ever classified at all?

The report, which is now available in its entirety on the United Kingdom National Archives Web Archive, explores the belief that unidentified aerial phenomena are plasmas of a type unknown to science, and not only that, that they are capable of generating novel perceptions in people who come close enough to them. In the report, UAPs are frankly acknowledged to be of unknown origin, and it is noted that the "temporal cortex can be rendered electrically unstable" by them. "Neurological rather than biological effects may be the clue to some human behavior after exposure to the near field of UAP radiation. Particularly sensitive are the temporal lobe areas of the brain." There is never any reason given for the conclusion that they are entirely natural formations, but it is acknowledged that they have been part of human life for a very long time.

This report was more or less ignored by the media and society at large, in part, I suppose because nobody has any idea what to do with its revelations. But, in fact, it is a stunning and damning admission. Governmental authorities have kept secret for years the fact that unknown plasmas can and do affect the minds of people who come close to them, and have done nothing to prevent the spread of the now enormous UFO lore and all of its attendant beliefs.

So what are the plasmas? Who have they affected? Are their effects on the mind temporary or permanent? Are they dangerous? The report discusses the various frequencies that are involved, and it is obvious that much more is known than is being released. Are the plasmas alive in some way, for example? Some parts of the report seem to hint at this. Given that they emit frequencies that affect the brain, it would seem important to try to identify what they are and answer any and all questions about them.

As I pointed out in the beginning pages of this book, balls of light, orbs, flashes and radiant beings have been part of our history for a very long time. As St. Paul and others seem to have experienced and the Condign Report affirms, they generate hallucinations. In fact, their effect on the mind is among the most powerful in human experience. Given this, it seems a trifle disingenuous of the authors of the Condign Report to discuss the phenomenon without referring to its enormous cultural influence. And to assume that it is entirely unconscious and by implication random seems premature.

We have never even asked the most obvious question about these plasmas: very simply, what are they? The Catholic Church used to believe that the orbs of light so often reported were souls that were on fire, thus suffering. They were free to roam, which suggested that they weren't trapped in hell. So the conclusion was that they were souls in purgatory, as pointed out, for example, in Diana Pasulka's purgatory study, *Heaven Can Wait*.

I don't think it can be assumed without question that they are without any intelligent direction. Whatever affected me over all those years after my December 1985 experience seemed to me to be highly intelligent. I wouldn't so readily assume that they are entirely plasmid in nature, either. My impression is that some aspect of life that we don't understand is involved.

If we can learn to engage with it in an objective manner, we can potentially find some answers. Frequencies can be detected and analyzed. In fact, if the Condign Report isn't some sort of sinister effort to confuse the issue, there is every reason to think that an attempt to understand these plasmas would bear fruit.

After my 1985 encounter, high on the list of possibilities in my mind was temporal lobe dysfunction, either a tumor or temporal lobe epilepsy. As I have documented previously, tests for both proved negative. In fact, a very aggressive test for temporal lobe epilepsy revealed that I have an unusually stable brain. Not, however, one would assume, when in the presence of "UAP radiation."

The Condign Report provides official acknowledgment that unidentified aerial phenomena exist, and that they have effects on human beings. Given its release, it is no longer possible for governments to deny this. As these phenomena affect the mind, study is clearly essential.

The practice of official secrecy and lying has been with us for far too long, and the fact that it has come to surround the UFO and close encounter material is tragic. It has put on hold an important advance in our understanding of ourselves and our world. If a random, natural phenomenon is giving rise to the visions and hallucinations that generate our belief systems, that is of literally epochal importance. If it is in some way conscious, then the importance is beyond measure.

As we have pointed out elsewhere, this secrecy has also the effect of encouraging rampant speculation, which, in this case had led to the emergence of an elaborate folklore—strengthened, as is usually the case, by being based on a kernel of truth. So the secrecy hasn't simply stifled progress, it has caused a malign descent into the old labyrinth of folk belief, superstition, and confusion.

It has also created an unpleasant social problem. If any official source were now to openly admit that such plasmas exist, it is inevitable that the public would conclude that they were evidence of an alien presence on Earth. Advocates of the belief that UFOs are alien spacecraft, now more or less ignored, would suddenly come buzzing into the cultural foreground. As an example, a UFO group leader in 2015 uploaded a video to YouTube of a "meditation" during which UFOs apparently lit up the horizon. However, photo experts to whom I showed the video felt that the lights were flares, and there was a military base nearby. So it seems unlikely that the meditators were directing their attention toward communing aliens. Right now, such events are largely ignored. But if there is any official admission that UFOs may be real, the gurus and believers will leap onto our TV screens and our internet devices with what amounts to a religious message: welcome our visitors from on high. In the end, we will come to the same drearily familiar results that we have been enduring for thousands of years: a belief system will form which will once again by its very nature push away whatever is actually there.

Paul assumed that he encountered the risen body of Jesus on the Road to Damascus. Mohammed thought that the radiant being he encountered in the cave was the angel Gabriel. Moses thought that the burning bush was the presence of Yaweh.

Let's not go that far this time. Yes, the plasmas exist. No, we don't know that they are aliens. Yes, we can come to an objective understanding of what they are.

The rush to the alien hypothesis would need to be countered by an authoritative and convincing reaction from atmospheric scientists, physicists, astronomers, and cosmologists. As a person who has experienced the phenomenon for years, I would assert as strongly as I could that it must remain in question until research brings more clarity.

There is a grave danger that disclosure would cause the media to so amplify the assumption that our visitors are aliens that the question would be buried, eventually to be completely eradicated by the power of the new belief system. It has happened before. One example is *Contra Celsum.* Only by reading the Christian Father Origen's refutation of Celsus's book disputing the divinity of Jesus can one detect anything about the case he was trying to make. Celsus's text was long ago destroyed and every copy lost. In a world beset by the chaos of war and out-of-control climate change, desperate eyes will be lifted to the sky, and there will be the UFOs passing swiftly and silently across the mysterious night. There will be prayer, you can be sure, unless prior to that rational study has brought real understanding.

Plasmas certainly appear from time to time in the close encounter experience, but what about metallic-appearing UFOs and frankly physical entities? Are they illusions generated by the plasmas? When such creatures appeared to groups of witnesses at my cabin, and, for that matter, to me, I did not notice any plasmas in the vicinity.

As well, I can't believe that the people who put the implant in my ear were less than physical. They put a physical object in me. And yet . . . I cannot assert that the experience was as physical as, say, getting mugged might be. As always, something was "off," something was not quite right. As I read the Condign Report, I realized what it was. The morning after the implantation, the house was alive with electromagnetic anomalies. My car was so filled with static electricity that I leaped out of it in terror as I tried to back out of the garage. And what of the inexplicable magnetic field that was disabling the alarm system?

If there is a plasmid life form, can it sometimes penetrate into the physical, leaving behind traces like this . . . not to mention implants?

Despite my experiences, I find the idea of nonphysical life exceedingly hard to accept. If it exists, then the Western understanding of reality, as it has been evolving, is going to require some serious rejiggering. And yet, there are some interesting recent arguments that suggest that consciousness may of necessity and inevitably be eternal, and thus must persist outside of the brain. Physicist Dr. Roger Penrose and psychologist and anesthesiologist Dr. Stuart Hameroff have published an essay suggesting that consciousness is a deep-level effect of brain function, not, as is

commonly assumed now in the sciences, a side-effect of the vast number of computations taking place in the brain. In this theory, called orchestrated objective reduction, consciousness arises when noncomputational processing is formed by qubits on cells' microtubules. Unlike a classical bit, which has only a single state, a qubit has two states, positional and superpositional, which open it, because of the nature of nonlocality, potentially to vast presence. The theory also means, if it's correct, that consciousness would be indestructible and eternal, and therefore that the brain would not be its origin at all, but rather an instrument that would enable it to penetrate into the physical world.

Orchestrated objective reduction, or Orch-OR, as it is commonly called, is an interesting speculation, certainly. But it's a speculation only, and one that is open to criticism from both science and philosophy. Dr. Hameroff offers more information about the idea on his website, Quantum Consciousness.org.

Maybe there is something to Orch-OR or some of the other exotic theories of consciousness, but my sense of it is that science is still some distance away from finding a useful way to address the problem. And yet, despite all my intellectual resistance, I find myself living a life that is far better explained by the notion that there is a nonphysical component to consciousness than by the assumption that it is confined to the brain.

By way of illustration of why I feel that there is an extraphysical side to consciousness, and in acceptance of what my life has given me, let me tell some stories. But let me do this with a gentle admonishment not to take them as we have always in the past taken such stories, including my own, to either be accepted or rejected. Let such stories remain as descriptions of perceptions and part of the large question of the nature of mind and its relationship to its environment. Regard the next few paragraphs as a sort of ballad, a song sung as a story, about my way of experiencing my humanity and the world around me.

Beginning in 1986, my mind changed profoundly. I began to think in a quite different way. When I went out in the woods at night attempting to reengage with the entities I had encountered on the night of December 26, 1985, mostly nothing happened. But when it did, communication would come in the form of vivid mental imagery. In a typical incident, I was sitting on a stone and meditating when I became aware of a certain amount

of movement around me, so stealthy that it felt menacing, as if something was creeping up on me. By this time, I had disciplined myself not to indulge my fear. I had a question ready, and I asked it aloud: “What does the universe mean to you?” The answer I received was a vivid picture in my mind of a coffin.

This was an early example of what has become a process of communication by visions.

Visual thinking had always been there, but not communication by vision.

One lifelong vision actually comes from before I was born. At some point in my early teenage years, I discovered, to my embarrassment, that it’s not normal to remember coming into the womb. But I do remember this. That memory has come with me, I assume, from the day it happened. I cannot be sure, though, because after I mentioned it to some friends and was laughed at, I put it aside.

After 1985, it resurfaced. In it, I come down from a place of bright paths, feeling myself a speck of light—a plasma, I suppose. I am filled with peace. I am profoundly happy. Joyous.

I come down through the summer clouds, across the green umbrella of trees, moving in cuddled secrecy among their branches, disturbing only a cicada, whose ratcheting greets me as I enter the world, a sound which to this day draws me back to that lovely moment.

I then passed through the top of a window into a warm, summer-shaded bedroom. Below me on the bed a woman lay sleeping. She was great with child, and I knew that the body inside her was to be mine. I was born in June of 1945. As it was already warm in South Texas, this must have been in April or May of that year.

I have thought long about the depth of peace I knew during those moments that, as I now think, my consciousness was returning to time. It was the peace of eternity, our true core feeling, not the terror of the situation we are in during our excursions into mortality. In the difficult times of my life, which have been many, I have always had that memory to return to.

I went closer, slipping along the thread of communion with my mother until I was just above her. I was drawn by waves of love that acted like magnetism would on a fragment of iron. I went closer and closer, until I was in the folds of her summer blouse. Coming from within her was a quiet

surging sound, the waves of her heart. I went closer yet, and now there was a vibrant embrace, as if her soul was coming around me, drawing me to her. Then, in an act that is beyond anything I have known since, I penetrated into her. I went through her skin and into the churning ocean of her, and then into the body within. Perhaps coitus, in its desperate urgency and in the sense of annihilation that accompanies it, is a striving to return to this extremely secret moment that is hidden within all of us.

There are levels of ecstasy, I think, that the physical body filters out, but in that moment the soul—that little, peace-kissed fragment—knows both eternal the pleasure of being and the time-bound pleasure of penetration, and it is powerful. It must be one of the reasons we are drawn back to the wheel of life, to feel that again.

Then I was floating in her, and at once starting a conversation with her, spoken in whispers and songs, child to mother and mother to child, a sharing of plans and dreams and our entangled destinies.

Ah, Oedipus, sweet child of longing, and dear Dr. Freud, peering with his crystal light into these dark, uneasy halls. Even if it unfolded only in my imagination, that penetration of the womb exposes, I think, a deeply human and probably universal longing.

Our dialogue continued across our long companionship, until she died and her soul slipped away into what in the most haunting verse of Ecclesiastes is referred to as the "long home." Maurice Nicoll, in his book *Living Time*, suggests that the long home is the great shadow of the soul, stretching across vast time, and containing within it every moment of one's being, as acutely nostalgic, poignant, and ominous a record as can be imagined:

> *. . . because man goeth to his long home, and the mourners go about the streets: Or ever the silver cord be loosed, or the golden bowl be broken, or the pitcher be broken at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern. Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it.*

I wonder if the journey we take through time when we are born is really the center of life? Perhaps our more real existence is a steady state that exists outside of time—being fed by the experiences we collect during these temporal lives. We are fishermen along the riverbank of time. The part of us that is cast into the physical state no longer knows the future and the past, and so acts out of our deepest innocence, our truth. We, the anglers on the riverbank, cast this poignant bait that is ourselves into the flow of life in order to use experience to discover by the way we react to life's novelties and temptations who we truly are.

But what if this exploration of self brings bad news? What if we turn out to be evil—say, one casts oneself into life and sits there watching oneself don the black uniform of a Nazi or become a cruel parent or a criminal of some sort? What if one turns out to be, quite simply, awful?

Attached to that question is an enormity of moral ambiguity. If life does not end with the body, then it would seem wise to attend most carefully to the consequences of our actions. If our memories travel with us, then living a life that one might enjoy remembering would be of extraordinary importance.

I am also haunted by out of context memory, isolated recollections that I have no instinct about at all. Imagination? Something that happened? No context, no witnesses, no idea. Normally, I don't write about these memories, but one of them is relevant here. In it, I ask, "Do we have souls?" The answer I remember coming from that dangerously lovely *Communion* face is "Not all."

Perhaps it means that the journey through time is one not only of opportunity but also danger, just as our religions have been saying for millennia. We are here working toward a place in what I strongly sense is a marvelous otherness, a great being that is unfolded in eternity, carrying in its tender arms all that is.

Into this drama, then, comes the outsider which is also the same presence that has always been there, transformed by the modern mind into something that makes enough present sense to enable us to explore a relationship with it. We call it the alien . . . for the moment.

The truth? Contact will be at once with ourselves, our souls, and these mysterious others in all their provocative ambiguity.

Religion is not wrong in the various ways it recognizes this process of life struggle, but the religious vision of it is subjective, not the objective vision that comes from turning the supernatural into the super natural. Because it is now possible to do this, it is also now time to step away from the whole of the mythological context—all of the stories—that have, as they have offered us knowledge of this other world, also served as the veil that conceals it.

We need to discard all the gods and ghosts, the demons and aliens, and all the stories that go with them, the heroes and their journeys and their resurrections, and reenvision our relationship with this other world objectively. Then we may well see that there is a cycling back and forth taking place, the movement of souls into and out of bodies, living in time and outside of time. If those of us who are descended into time can acquire an objective understanding of why we have come into this state, we can make it vastly more useful to us than it is now. This would mean that we would remember who we are and why we came here, thus discovering for the first time in our history an objective answer to those ancient questions.

What if where we are now is the dark side, Hades, Sheol, the land of the dead—which, ironically, we think of as the land of the living? But if it is the dark side of the mandala, it is also the womb. Our lives here are preparation for a rebirth into timelessness, or so my experience suggests to me. We are here because the dark is where knowledge is hidden, and it is this knowledge we need to free ourselves, whatever that may mean to each of us.

The living, who we call the dead, come close to us now, calling to us to open our minds to a new vision of ourselves.

I have been a plasma, and it was delightful. I cannot recommend the experience more enthusiastically. The memory of those moments is among the most precious of my inner possessions. But I am hardly alone in this. Far from it. So now let me tell you about some plasmas I have known.

My mother did not leave me when she died. One night about fifteen years ago, I was at dinner at a friend's house in San Antonio. I'd stepped out into the back garden when I suddenly felt her presence. At that point, she had been dead for about five years. Her presence was palpable. I stood there, my eyes tightly closed, communing with her. I felt as if I could reach out and touch her. Just wonderful. Lovely, sweet sorrow.

Someone saw the expression on my face and, without knowing what was happening, snapped a photo of me. When the film was developed (it wasn't digital) there could be seen a small flare of light in the darkness of the sky, right in the direction I was facing. It's not precisely round, but more like a little flame—in fact, very like the old Catholic description of a soul in purgatory.

As impossible as this sounds, and as much difficulty as I have with such a concept, I have to say that I think that it could be her soul, penetrated deep into this dense world of ours, striving to reconnect with the love and companionship that had flowed between us. (Such living flames are hardly uncommon in the literature of the past, when people were too unschooled in science to understand that they ought to be impossible.)

My mother was my advocate. She understood that my mind needed food, and introduced me to authors like Saki and Kafka and Salinger. In my eleventh year, she bought me the Encyclopedia Britannica's *Great Books of the Western World*, which almost sent me to heaven. I devoured Plato, Suetonius, Descartes, Kant—it was glorious. My father felt that I should stay with children's books, but she defied him. I was so grateful to her, and I still am. A precocious, excessively bright little boy in Texas in the 1950s was at a distinct disadvantage. So we were very close, and I just cannot tear myself away from the belief that it was her on that night, doing her part to help me awaken to a very real world that continues to seem to me to be entirely impossible.

Whatever is knocking on our door, it could not have chosen a more resistant individual than me with whom to communicate. I can't believe in conscious plasmas, but I have no choice except to live with them. I suppose it's possible that I ended up dancing on this particular plank because I am at once exceedingly skeptical of things like the soul but unable to deny my own experiences. I can neither believe nor disbelieve, but also I am no agnostic. I don't think that the question is unanswerable. On the contrary, it seems to me that whatever this is, is making quite an effort to draw us toward a new vision of reality, and with it a new understanding of ourselves, of what we are, where we are, and why we are here.

Now I will tell the story of another plasma—or rather, seven of them. I've recounted this before, in *Solving the Communion Enigma,* but not in this new way.

When we had our cabin in upstate New York, there was a room upstairs under the eaves where I used to meditate at night. Because of my notoriety, it had become too dangerous for me to walk outside after dark—not because of the visitors, but because of local people who had primitive ideas about me, among them, inevitably, that I was in league with demons. What a bore, and particularly boring to be shot through the head by some nincompoop who would have preferred to burn me at the stake. So I quit going out into the woods at night, to my great regret. I feared that I would lose the thread of connection to my visitors. But that did not happen.

One night when I was meditating in that room, I became aware of a presence. It was powerful. Immediate. Right in front of me. For a few minutes, I sat before it. But I couldn't concentrate. Finally, I said aloud that I couldn't meditate with somebody I couldn't see, and they'd have to either show their face or I was leaving. Nobody appeared.

Of course I had no definite idea if anybody was there. I just felt them. Felt, if you will, a curious presence. I'd had a certain amount of experience with invisible beings, but not at this level of intensity. It was as if there was somebody standing a foot or so in front of me whom I could not see. Mostly, when there had been invisible presences in our house, our cats had reacted even though we saw nothing. I only half-believed things were there, and didn't want to believe at all. I spent some little time trying to understand how invisibility might be possible in the real world, and none of the solutions I found even came close to approaching the level of it I was seeing—or rather, wasn't. And yet, it had happened to me and to others at my cabin too many times for me to deny it. The filmmaker I mentioned in chapter 4 had observed the being beside his bed disappear. As my son and I came up to the cabin, the filmmaker and his wife experienced a burst of heat so intense that they thought the bed was on fire. We then saw the translucent figure racing away from the cabin. If technology was involved, then the translucence suggests that the device had been turned down but not off. (I want one!)

All very logical, and all personally witnessed by me. So I sat there in the meditation room forcing myself to accept that somebody might really be

there, but was not willing to show themselves.

It was completely unbearable. I even thought that I could hear them breathing softly in and out with robotic precision. Finally, I gave up and left. I went down the hall and went to bed. I tossed and turned, of course, but eventually fell asleep. By this time, I was beginning to understand my role as that of a student in a school. I'd passed through a dark initiatory phase that had plunged me into the deepest underworld I am able to imagine, a place of bizarre sexual challenge and profound heartbreak. I was devastated by these experiences. Anne less so. "Don't you see how fascinating all of this is?" she once asked.

The dark is indeed fascinating and informative, but it is indeed also dangerous. It is on journeys into it, though, that we find ourselves. Every initiate comes to the same shocking place, for all the paths of the underworld through which we are traveling lead to it. There is a mirror there, old and full of shadows, and it is in the hints it returns of our faces—our dark, dark faces—that we find ourselves. To lose the true way is to become fully human. To get lost in the dark is to become truly conscious. But it takes a little light, or as the alchemists say, a little gold. That tiny bit of self-knowledge brings definition to the image and makes it real.

Later that night, as I have described in *Solving the Communion Enigma*, I was awakened by a punch on my shoulder, a familiar process that to me meant that the visitors had come.

But not, this time, short blue trolls or willowy insects with great, hypnotic eyes. Instead, sitting on the foot of the bed was a small man. He wore a tunic cinched at the waist with a simple belt, perhaps rope. He was absolutely still. I think that this was because, had he moved, he would have flown off into another state and I would no longer have been able to see him. To remain visible to me, he had to be as still as stone.

I took his hand and smelled his skin, as I had done before with the visitors. Only he was not mildly or oddly scented. He smelled human, strongly so. If he was a spirit that had somehow conjured up a body, he had included the body's odor.

I looked into his face from a foot or so away. The eyes were deep, black pools. I call those "knowledge eyes." They see more than we do, and that is very hard to bear.

I recognized him. I have never said this before because I could not even begin to explain it, but now perhaps I have some ideas that make a sort of sense.

Among my recollections are some from other lives. Whether or not these are lives I have lived I don't know, but they have a spontaneous quality that sets them apart from ordinary dreams, fantasies, and imaginings. In some ways they are like the images of other worlds that flash through my mind when I am meditating and have found a receptive inner state. Still, I don't know what any of this is, and would not presume to be an advocate for reincarnation, let alone visionary travel to other worlds. Both things, in their different ways, imply that our understanding of the world and the mind are deeply flawed. If we are reincarnating in life after life, then the modern secular notion that we evaporate with the death of the brain is flawed in yet another way from that discussed previously. It implies that we are part of some other mechanism, of which we understand almost nothing. And yet books like *Soul Survivor,* with its story of a small child who could remember extraordinary details of a life lived during World War II, and Robert Snow's *Looking for Carroll Beckwith*, make it hard to believe that there isn't something there. Snow was chief of detectives for the Indianapolis Police Department when a past life regression at a party led him on one of the most fantastic journeys of discovery ever recorded, during which he found that the detailed memories he had during the regression and had written down with his detective's attention to detail actually described the life of an obscure nineteenth-century artist called Carroll Beckwith in ways that are beyond coincidence.

Three of my own recollections took place in ancient Rome. Two of them involve violent deaths, and one of these is relevant here. In it, I am rising out of the Circus Maximus. I have just been killed in a chariot race, and the enormous crowd is cheering wildly—cheering my courage, perhaps, but it seems more likely that it's because they've bet in favor of my opponent. As I rise up toward what at that moment is something familiar to me—a huge circle of light—I look down on them. These people, who while I was alive would have had a great variety of facial features, now look almost the same. Perhaps I wasn't seeing their individual characters but their essential selves. Then again, maybe it was simply a dream and there was a lack of detail.

The people have a certain cast to their faces—a way of holding them—that is the same as that of the man who sat on the foot of my bed.

Now, I'm not going theorize about this. What I want to do is put it on the table. In part, obviously, I am telling you about a complex state of mind. I might be describing memories that originate outside of time—in fact, therefore not memories but states of vision of a sort that we really cannot describe in our present languages, which do not offer any way of expressing timeless experience.

Perhaps to really talk about and communicate with this timeless level of being, a more sophisticated tongue is needed, one that recognizes not only verbs of present, past, and future tense, but also verbs of permanence. Such verbs would draw their "action" not from duration, but from direction of view and intensity of seeing. They would thus simulate attention in timelessness just as conventional verbs simulate it in time. Such words will come, but they must be organic, entering the language out of need, not as a coinage. I wonder, if such a language had been available to me when I was interacting with the extraordinary man who sat at the foot of my bed, would I have been able not only to engage with him on my terms, but also on his?

Now, let me return to the moment as the two of us were experiencing it. I was holding his hand, which was very light and small, like a child's. It was not absolutely physical. It did not have heft, it had a slight weight. Instinct caused me to hold it carefully. It felt as if it would be easy to crush, as if it was made out of some lighter flesh than my own.

But the smell of it was really powerful. There were two levels, the smell of salty skin and the smell of the oils of an unwashed body. Early on in my experience, I had started trying to use my sense of smell to add another dimension to what I was seeing and feeling. Skeptics have pointed out that strong odors are associated with certain types of seizure. Beyond saying that my experiences can't be dismissed as temporal lobe epilepsy, I wouldn't disagree with the theory that some sort of seizure activity might be involved. The brain must be doing something different from what it usually does, or people would not be engaged with this other world only at times. As Jeff put it the last chapter, trauma and transcendence are not exclusive; the former often opens a door to the latter.

My involvement with the man was in that moment extremely intimate. I raised my head and looked again at his face. The eyes were very deep,

shadowed with knowledge. “Knowledge eyes.” I did not know why, then. I do now. We look at passing time from inside its flow. He was looking at it from outside. Thus he knew truth from beyond the veil of death. There was also companionship, though, in the extreme strangeness of the moment, and startling familiarity.

As I dropped his hand, he disappeared. I thought to myself, “Now, if he comes back, I’ll meditate with him.” I went down the hall. I was happy, overjoyed. I thought that it was the triumph of a lifetime, frankly.

I sat down, feeling very proud of my years of facing my fears out in those woods, and my hours of meditation. Talk about conjuring. This was the real thing.

I sat alone. Nobody showed up, not even an invisible nobody. Disappointed, I eventually went back to bed. This was one time that I did not entertain the possibility that I’d had an ordinary dream or a hallucination. I’d been wide awake. I had held his hand in mine. I’d been a foot away from him. No, as bizarre, as impossible as it seemed, to me he had been real, and that fact meant to me that this world is not what it seems, and we do not know what it is, only that we are in it. The pig and the chicken, the chimp and the dog, do not know what their worlds are, but they also cannot know their own ignorance like we can. That knowledge—the awareness of the gap—means that the gap can be filled.

The next night I returned to the meditation room. All was quiet—until, quite suddenly, the most fantastic thing happened. In quick succession, there were seven thuds on the roof. Remembering the man’s small size, I thought to myself, “My god, I’ve conjured the seven dwarfs.” I closed my eyes and did the meditation that I have been doing regularly since 1970, when as I have said, Joe Stein taught it to me. If ever there was a person in my life whom I hold in blessed memory, it is him. On that night, then, began one of the premiere experiences of my life, one for which I remain grateful beyond words. I was actually meditating with people from another world, or so I thought at first. But it turned out that it was something even more extraordinary.

Each night, I went to the meditation room and each night, a few minutes later, the seven thuds occurred. During daylight hours, I went up on the roof to see if there was any possibility that it might be raccoons or

possums dropping down from the trees, or even pinecones, but it always happened just after I entered the room, and always exactly seven thuds.

For the first few weeks, not a lot happened: meditation, waiting, attempting to reach out in some way, enjoying the quiet and the wonderful sense of the body that one gets after many years of working with it in this manner. Over time, sensation expands, until one finally comes to the discovery that the nervous system doesn't end at the skin or even the few millimeters beyond it that the electric body extends. It never ends, not in space, not in time. Never.

Once or twice, I think that there were small hands laid on my shoulders from behind, and I think I might have heard breathing, very steady, with that same strange sense of mechanical perfection that I had found in the more alien-appearing visitors. As if they were perfect machines, brilliant, filled with insight and understanding, and far more emotionally complete and complex than we could ever hope to be—machines of the gods.

From time to time, we'd spend a week in New York, and once when we returned, Anne said, "There's somebody living in the house."

When I asked her why she thought that, she said that the bed in the meditation room was being slept in (it did double duty as an occasional guest room). It was true. The bed was being slept in.

To me, this meant that this ethereal being needed rest. He needed shelter. So, what was he? Thinking back to the plasmas that plant illusions in the temporal lobe, I wonder now what I was actually dealing with? Could there be people—beings—with the same ability? People who could seem to be living on a different plane, but who, in the end, needed a roof over their heads and a bed at night?

I tried hard to catch him. I tried to photograph him. I set up a video camera in the corridor. I popped into the room at night and took random pictures with a still camera.

We would hear him around the house, stealthy movement, sighs, an errant rustle.

Still, the meditations went on, night after night, the seven thuds followed by a meditation session. Never face-to-face, and usually little of notice took place.

During this period, our son decided to bring some of his friends from school to spend a weekend at the house. He gave me strict instructions: no UFO books visible, no discussion of aliens, flying saucers, anything like that. When he was fourteen, he had said to me, "You really are the most embarrassing father in the world." I had to agree. I assured him that there would be no saucer chatter. But then he said that they were going to sleep out in the woods. I warned him that the visitors were certainly around. A group of nice kids came—and at once began questioning me about *Communion*. After a very pleasant evening together, they went out into the woods with sleeping bags.

Later, I meditated, and sure enough, the seven thuds.

The next morning, as the kids began to drift in, I noticed some rather wide eyes. Some of them, it turned out, had seen seven glowing orbs floating through the woods. Another had experienced a cloud of mayflies form into the hauntingly beautiful face of a woman. Throughout the morning, these kids were quiet and introspective.

They left that afternoon, off into their lives again, having camped out, I would think, on a very real frontier.

My relationship with my meditation partners continued to develop. There were seven thuds, always, but I seemed to be interacting with a single individual. At least, this was my perception.

I asked him where he was from. The reply was fascinating. It came in the form of three little half-sucked candies being laid before a book in my library: *Life Between Life* by Joel Whitten and Joe Fisher.

So I asked the question: What do I need to do to avoid the wheel of life. I want to ascend.

The answer was the most powerful moral lesson I have ever received. It began one night with a startling review of my life—the sort of thing that is supposed to happen at the moment of death, I suppose. Image after image from my life appeared before my eyes. I saw a good, honest life, flawed but pretty blameless. But then something appeared that was of interest. I was in a hotel room in Beverly Hills with a beautiful young woman. I wanted to make love to her, but I was hesitating, forcing myself not to, respecting my vow of marriage and my love for Anne.

Still, every detail of the meetings I'd had with this woman came rushing past.

I was left on that night devastated and, quite frankly, confused. I hadn't violated my vow. I'd been tempted, yes, but no violation.

When I got up to go to bed, I discovered that it was already three. I'd been meditating for four hours. Exhausted, I collapsed into the bed and threw my arms around my beloved wife. Silently, I cried tears of gratitude that I had not broken my vow.

Later, I woke up. The ceiling was gone, the roof was gone. Overhead was a blackness that I knew at once was the appalling face of infinity. Endless dark. Arrayed around the borders of this opening were seven faces peering down at me. Gentle faces. Angry faces.

Then it ended. I was fully awake. I lay there thinking about it for a time, wondering where it lay on the spectrum of reality. A dream? I thought not. But what, then?

I went close to Anne and kissed her cheek. She cuddled against me, delighted.

I had almost betrayed her, but I had not done so. I had wanted to, though, so very badly. And it wasn't like the incident with the gray being. That I could not control. This, I could.

Some time later I woke up and there, hanging over our bed, were the two most terrible creatures I had ever seen. They were spiders, each at least three feet from stem to stern. They had gleaming black abdomens that were crossed by yellow stripes like tigers. Worse, they were not stable on the ceiling, especially the one over Anne.

My impulse was to roll off that bed and run for my life. Then I thought, "Wake up, you fool, this is the mother and the father of the nightmares."

Fully awake now, I leaped out of the bed. Surely they would evaporate, will-o'-the-wisps of dream.

But no. I stood there at the foot of the bed staring at them. I was awake and they were as real as ever. I could even hear the slick clatter of their busy, complicated jaws.

Anne lay perhaps three feet beneath one of them, sound asleep. Some of its legs had come off the wooden planks of the ceiling and were scrabbling for purchase. The sound filled the room.

It looked as if it would fall on Anne, right now.

My dear God, how I wanted to run. But if I did that, then what would happen? She had said early on, “You won’t let anything happen to me, will you?” I told her that I would protect her. But how did I know that? Now, it seemed as if I was lying.

Another leg came loose and began jittering wildly. The abdomen was now tilted. I could see a stinger in it the size of a small knife. My body screamed at me to run, but I could not run, my love would not let me. On legs of lead, transfixed by terror, I approached the bed. The pulsating demon was inches from my face. I could not dare touch it, try to push it away. God only knew what would happen if it and its brother started running around the room. What was their venom like? Where were they from? Certainly not this world.

I did the only thing I could to protect my wife, which was to lie down on top of her so that my body was between her and the spider.

She opened sleepy arms, welcoming her husband to her in the night, opening herself body and heart to the man she loved.

I lay there, waiting for the spider to drop down on me. She lay there waiting for the act of love to commence.

In that instant, there was a feeling like weight lifted. My body felt free, my soul like the soul of a child. Like that, the spiders had gone. The night—the beautiful, earthly night, filled with sensual promise—had returned.

I wept and her comforting arms came around me. Joy filled me. We rode the small hours together in the boat of our love, crossing to morning.

Listening to all these stories, Anne decided that she wanted to give meditating with the seven visitors a try. She’d also spent years in the Gurdjieff Foundation. While she wasn’t a meditator, she was a sensitive, exquisitely conscious human being, and on a powerful spiritual journey of her own.

A few nights later, she joined me in the meditation room. Soon enough, the thuds came. She’d heard them many times, as they reverberated through the whole house. But she had never been here, right under them. She said, “I’m not ready for this,” and quickly left the room.

Anne had, in that moment, done something that is essential to spiritual search: she had refused the call. The anguish of regret that causes a deep inlooking is an essential part of the spiritual journey.

This led her, over the years, to a point where she was well prepared for her next great spiritual encounter, which was a near-death experience that took place in 2005, when she lay in a hospital bed, hovering between life and death after a near-fatal brain bleed. She found herself at first in a sort of limbo. Where was she? Then our Siamese cat Coe—long dead—appeared to her. "These humans," he snorted, "can't even find the world of the dead on their own." He led her to a sort of transfer point, like the waiting room of a train station. All around her were people holding great bags of belongings, far too heavy to take anywhere. A voice said to her, "You can go on if you wish."

But this time, she did not refuse the call—it wasn't toward ecstasy, it never is. The call is toward deeper search, and she decided to come back to life, bringing with her this simple but powerful take of nonidentification: we must leave the baggage of life behind if we are to ascend wholly into timelessness. One day, our species will no longer be using the physical world at all, but before that, we must let those burdens go.

Including, incidentally, the burden of sin, which was the real message of the spiders: embrace love and your sins will forget you.

At this point, I might put in a word about animals and plants, and, in particular, cats. When I once managed to leave my body while in full consciousness—becoming, I suppose, a plasma—I was able to not only see myself and Anne lying in our bed, but also to move out through the wall of the cabin and into the yard. I could see that everything—the trees, the bits of grass in the early snow (it was October, I believe, of 1987), were covered with shimmering blue light, very soft. I think this light was alive. I think that it will remain alive after those trees and plants die. I see it is part of the vastness of nonphysical life.

Our cats weren't there on that night, but had they been, I have little doubt that they would both have been looking right at me—the plasma, not the body in the bed. They are somehow sensitive to the life of the soul, the cats. Perhaps it's why the Egyptians revered them so, leaving vastly more of them mummified than any other creature. They believed that the dead could use the body as a sort of focal point after life—a tradition that has come down to us in the West in the form of the belief that the body will "rise incorruptible" at the end of time. The Egyptians mummified, we embalm. But not cats. As we have become blind to the true richness of the living

world, we've left ideas such as the spiritual life of animals behind. Coe, I think, would disagree. He was not wrong to think that we humans have lost our way. Not all of us, though. Many elder peoples still see all living things as being invested with spirit. They perceive the world as being invested at every level with gods—that is to say, with what we call consciousness.

We aren't ready to really see this in all its objective truth, not the elder peoples, not the Westerners, not the secularists or the religionists, none of us. But we can begin. That means just this: to give up the veil between what we call the living and what we call the dead, and live as a whole species, the part of us penetrated into time and the part of us living outside of it, with the aim of finally becoming a new being, altogether outside of time, perfect.

That takes wisdom, though, and that's why we journey into time. We the bodies are the dark side of the mandala, where wisdom is sought and found. The souls are the light side of it, where the truth is known. Our dance is bounded by a circle, which is a form without end and thus endless with possibilities.

If there are aliens here, then they are already like this, the "living" and the "dead" together as one, seeking toward the mysterious ecstasy that is like a fata morgana, a special sort of mirage that appears to be a ghost palace shimmering on the horizon, beguiling, elusive, but so rich with promise that it must ever be pursued, ever to be sought.

I've described elsewhere the anguish of losing that cabin and with it the world I had noticed there—and, in this level of the human journey, noticing is conjuring. The act of magic is the act of seeing. I won't return to that time and I certainly will never return to the cabin. In any case, disaster followed disaster. Finally, I lost everything, including that place where I had woven a link between the worlds that had no recourse to myth. A great loss.

On the last night, I meditated. The thuds came. I said that this was my final moment there. There would be no more. Yet again, I asked them—begged them—to help me. There came from above uncomfortable stirrings. I waited, but nothing more. As I had many times before, I made a last request: please let me see you as you really are. Then I went off to bed. Early the next morning, we would leave that place forever.

About half an hour later, I noticed a glow coming in the bedroom windows. Quite a bright glow, in fact. For a moment, I thought that the

house might be on fire. But when I rushed to the window, the most extraordinary thing I have ever seen appeared. It was a small star, blazing with beams of light. The light was so beautiful that it was agonizing. It was well aware of the difficulty I was having, and slid out of my view, so that I could only see part of it. The beams were narrow lasers that pricked through my skin and deeply penetrated me. They brought with them a sense of the essence of this man with whom I had been meditating for these past months. They were an embrace, an affirmation, a treasury of information. In short, a tremendous gift.

Then he was gone. My life at the cabin was gone. The next morning we left, leaving behind the objective enchantment that had been achieved there. Subsequent inhabitants of that cabin have noticed nothing unusual. I have departed, and my devils with me.

What a beautiful experience, the years at the cabin. How very grateful I am. I cannot even begin to put it into words. And that last event, the star in the front yard—I saw the truth then, what a human being might become, if he has the compassion and the will.

It was also a taste of what our world might one day be, if the caterpillar ever has the wisdom to see the butterfly and the courage to face its mighty beauty and protect its breathless fragility. I suspect that there are other worlds in which the veil between the living and the dead has long ago fallen, and the whole species is evolving as one, partly injected into time and partly in timelessness, and both elements working together toward the discovery of a greater whole. I suspect that our visitors—at least, the aliens among them—are already like this. In fact, I would assume that they are more deeply involved with our souls than with our bodies.

Will we ever manage to face the reality of the soul? I certainly trust so, because if we don't, I don't think we can evolve. Right now our intellectuals and scientists are running from their souls, while many other people remain trapped behind the deceptive latticework of religious belief.

I had a brilliant, extraordinary experience with these plasmas, once again glimpsing the second part of Jeff's "Human as Two." But what did I actually see? It would seem, a human being who had become light. I saw him, tasted his essence, and came into a state of communion with him that will remain with me in life and into death, and, I suspect, forever. For that is what this is about, in the end, all of it: facing ourselves as part of greater

consciousness, and coming to terms with the fact that our species, like others—perhaps all others—has two forms, one physical and embedded in time, and the other energetic and living outside of time. Once we have objective knowledge of this, we can also build an objective relationship between them. From my experience, this is going to be an incredible challenge, touched both by wonder and danger, but with truly extraordinary rewards. The confusion we experience now will gradually slip behind us, and there will be a useful basis for joining colloquy with others like us, who are on the same journey that all life is on, toward ecstasy.

15

The Soul Is a UFO

JEFF

[A]lthough it is the approximate size of a big vehicle, it is clearly one single luminous mass, not projecting light beams like reflectors or suchlike. Its aspect is like that of a big flat star, illuminating without blinding, with a strange incongruence between its respectable size and the low light intensity. . . . The light appears to have some body; it is denser than a thick cloud although I cannot find a substance to which it can be compared. Plasma, perhaps?

ANTHROPOLOGIST DIEGO ESCOLAR DESCRIBING HIS ENCOUNTER WITH AN ANOMALOUS, LUMINOUS ENTITY IN ARGENTINA

I have studied religion for three decades now. I don't run into many new ideas. But this notion is shockingly new: the soul as a plasmalike energy that can superpower our imaginal capacities and so generate the movies of visionary experience. Here the soul is an exotic form of energy interacting with a primate nervous system, and the symbol and the mythical narrative are the means of focusing, working with, projecting, even materializing that energy.[78] Here the soul is a conscious star gently blazing inside a skull. Here the soul is a UFO that has landed for a time in a body-brain, in what Whitley suggests is "a sort of biological technology" for the soul. Hence all those "conscious machines" of the UFO literature—that, after all, is what we may well be.

In some ways, this is old news, very old news. Solar light, spherical star souls, and mysterious forms of radiance—in short, *conscious light*—are among the oldest and most universal expressions of divinity on the planet.[79] Even the apostle Paul famously described the resurrection body as a "spiritual body" (*soma pneumatikon*) destined for the realm of the sun, moon, and stars, which is what his culture generally meant when it spoke of "heaven" (1 Cor 15:45–49). "Spiritual" here meant "of the *pneuma*," which the ancients thought of as a very subtle *material* substance, like air, breath, or fire, that extended throughout the physical universe—in short, as a kind of invisible, living cosmic energy. By a "spiritual body," then, Paul did *not* mean an "immaterial" one. He meant a real immortal body that shines like the stars in the night sky, indeed, that, in some readings, *is* a kind of human star.[80]

The early Christian Gnostic texts are filled with similar convictions about our true home among the stars, about the secret spark of divinity that sleeps in us all, about the stellar nature of the soul, and about the savior who descended from the stars in order to teach us how to get back home. Such weirdly familiar details have led artist and author Christopher Knowles to write in his *Secret Sun* blog of early Christian Gnosticism as "history's first flying saucer cult."[81] I think Chris is right.

And Chris is in good company. My colleague April DeConick, an expert on early Christianities, has just finished a marvelous book on "the Ancient New Age" in which she demonstrates convincingly how modern science-fiction films are deeply resonant with what she calls the Gnostic spirituality of the ancient world.[82] This revolutionary spirituality rejected belief, ritual, sacrifice, and martyrdom (all still inflicting endless violence on us) and proclaimed a direct mystical knowing (*gnosis*) of the inner divinity of the spirit, or *pneuma,* itself, which the Gnostics knew as a real spark of God temporarily encased in a material form but destined, ultimately, for the stars.[83]

Here was a new spiritual orientation that called into question, really denied, all the local ethnic or inherited religions and their petty, violent gods, including and especially the bloody god of the orthodox Christians. Here was a wildly syncretistic practice that pulled in *everything*—from Homer to Greek and Latin magic to wild speculations about multiple

universes—in order to say what it had to say. Here was an ancient search for charismatic gurus, in this case Egyptian ones. Here was a loose but effective network of grassroots movements poised against organized religion and its oppressive alignment with the imperial state. Here was a Mediterranean counterculture that flourished for centuries before it was stamped out by the "right-thinking" orthodox churches. Here was the Ancient New Age.

Physics and Mystics

In its shocking juxtaposition of "ancient" and "New Age," April's phrase captures beautifully the kinds of comparative practices I have been proposing here through "the future of the past." What, of course, is fundamentally different today, in the future of that past, is the invocation of modern science. The ancient Gnostics did not know what we know. They did not have evolutionary biology, modern cosmology, and quantum physics.

These new forms of knowledge are game-changers that, with or without the scientists, are dramatically reshaping the religious imagination as they inspire new forms of secular spirituality and guide experiencers into new imaginal territory. Modern peoples, after all, rarely see hellscapes or visions of the Trinity anymore, but they are increasingly reporting popping into hyperdimensional mindspaces, becoming one with the evolutionary impulse of the universe, and knowing or "seeing" a superconnected quantum realm. With respect to our science, modern forms of mysticism are becoming more and more *realist*. Whitley's call in the last chapter for us to form an "objective" relationship with both the biological medium of our time-bound mortality and the energetic consciousness of our "eternal being"—a version of what I have called the Human as Two—is a perfect example of this kind of realist understanding of the embodied soul-star.

However sophisticated these modern experiences and expressions might be, conventional scientists like to call all such reports "New Agey." Like the word "anecdotal," this is little more than an intellectual dodge, a moral meanness, a rhetorical sleight of hand designed to stop or sidestep the conversation, I presume, so that it doesn't get too far.

Too far into what?

Into the actual history of science. The truth is that numerous founders of quantum physics—Werner Heisenberg, Erwin Schrödinger, Niels Bohr, and Wolfgang Pauli, to name the most obvious—were deeply committed to worldviews that combined mysticism and rationalism. Many of them also saw comparative resonances between the mind-bending implications of quantum physics and different forms of mysticism. And they said as much, very explicitly and very clearly. They went to places like the *Brahman,* or cosmic unity, and *Atman,* or Self, of the Hindu Upanishads (Schrödinger), the yin and yang symbolism of Chinese Taoism (Bohr), and the paranormal synchronicities of Jungian psychology (Pauli) to help better understand what they thought quantum physics was mapping formally and mathematically. Generally speaking, they were drawing parallels, compatibilities, and complementarities, not simple equations, between physics and the mystics. Still, some of them were pointing toward a worldview in which the math and the mysticism were two different expressions of the same fundamental reality. In effect, they suggested: "If you want to understand what the implications of quantum physics might 'look' like up here, in the world of human experience, go read the unities and paradoxes of the mystics." They were after a realist mysticism.

And this is before we get to what the historian of science David Kaiser has affectionately called "the hippies who saved physics." These countercultural physicists became fascinated with the apparent "telepathic" effects that entangled particles exhibit in Bell's theorem, or what Einstein had famously called "spooky action at a distance." [84] Such intellectuals kept the notion of entanglement alive for decades while the rest of the physics community was being told to "shut up and calculate," that is, to quit talking about the philosophical implications of the physics and just do the math.[85] Many of these countercultural physicists were convinced that quantum effects *do* scale up into human experience, and that these effects can be seen in parapsychological phenomena and mystical experiences of mind. One of them, my friend and colleague Nick Herbert, has written eloquently about these effects under the banners of "elemental mind" and "Quantum Tantra." The latter is his dream of a scientific-spiritual practice that would lead to an erotic union with the physical universe.

And then, of course, there are the anomalous experiences of the scientists themselves. As a single example, consider Jane English. Jane has a Ph.D. in experimental high energy physics. She is also the illustrator/photographer of the best-selling English translation of the *Tao Te Ching*, with Gia-Fu Feng. In short, she is an heir to Niels Bohr, who put the Tao on his coat of arms to capture the two-in-one paradoxes of quantum physics in which light can be measured either as a particle or a wave. The same paradox caught Jane's attention. For her it functioned as a Zen koan, that is, as a riddle that awakened her into the true nature of reality.

She was reading Fritjof Capra's classic reflection on the same, *The Tao of Physics*, and in particular a passage about this particle/wave or yin/yang paradox.[86] She got to Capra's discussion about how the "new awareness" of Zen could also be an "awareness of atomic reality." Then it happened:

> *The experience began with a sense of sudden dissolution, especially of visual forms. After a moment, I was aware of patterns of energy, millions of pinpoints of light, and a confused rush of visual sensation. . . . everything was somehow different; there was no in-here/out-there split in my seeing!. . . . In this state there was no space or sense of separation between objects and my eyes. Thus I felt no need for light to exist to connect objects to eyes. Objects, eyes, and light no longer had the objective existence they had seemed to have just before. . . . I realized that the wave/particle paradox had been my first koan, and that I had just solved it.*[87]

Essentially, Jane English had *become* light, had *become* the energy of the world, which is consciousness.

The results, of course, were utterly transformative. She was changed. Jane had once "accepted the orthodox physics thinking that says that quantum physics has no meaning for personal reality, that it is just a computational device, and that questions about things you can't measure are meaningless." In short, she had bought the line that quantum effects do not scale up to our world. She now knew that none of this is true. She understood that it was perfectly possible to directly experience the world of

quantum physics, and that quantum physics does have meaning for us "up here" in the big world, profound and beautiful meaning. She understood that the paradoxes of quantum physics are nothing more than functions of us trying to understand reality with our objectifying senses, instead of directly via consciousness itself. She understood that consciousness could not be reduced to the mechanistic laws of Newtonian physics. She also realized that "many psychic and healing phenomena that appear extraordinary on our usual Newtonian, sensory reality are actually quite ordinary in these other realities."[88] Jane English had been shown the super natural world.

The Energies of God

Jane, of course, was not the first, or the last, to suggest that consciousness, energy, and light are expressions of the same underlying super-reality. Consider Whitley's invocation of the language of "plasma" again. What is important here is Whitley's perfectly accurate observation that these plasmalike soul-spheres show every appearance of being conscious and intelligent. Such an observation—commonly reported, as we will see in a moment—carries the stunning implication that life and intelligence may not need carbon-based life-forms or a nervous system to express and know itself.

I have long thought something like this, if in an inchoate and confused way. I remember, for example, reading in college about the bizarre qualities that take over at the speed of light, things like extreme time dilation to the point where time stands still. I remember wondering whether "eternity" might be a loose term for this stopping of time at the speed of light, and whether the classic "speeding tunnel" effect and sense of eternity "in the Light" of near-death experiences might be how the imagination translates a ride on (or as) a beam of light. Is there a mystical "inside" to light itself that is related to but not captured by the "outside" of light modeled by physics?

I still think those thoughts and ask those questions.

These were not entirely original ideas, it turns out. In graduate school, I learned that the Greek Orthodox tradition developed an extremely

sophisticated mystical theology in the thirteenth century through which the light seen around saints and experienced within mystical encounters was understood to be not a metaphor or a symbol, or an effect of any cause, but really and truly God.[89] Here God is not *like* light. God *is* light.

The architect of this mystical theology was the monk and hermit Gregory Palamas (1296–1359). Gregory argued that the knowledge derived from such mystical experiences of light is the knowledge of the "energies" of God, but never of the "essence" of God, which remains unknowable to us as creatures. One does not have to read too far into Greek Orthodox spirituality and its goal of *theosis,* or "deification," to realize that Gregory and his colleagues were not being metaphorical about these luminous energies or their deifying effects on the human body and person that is fortunate enough to get illuminated by their rays. Gregory even argued that those who have been deified by such energies become *homotheoi*, that is, "co-divinities" or "co-gods."

So there is a very deep historical precedent to the conscious plasmas and mystical illuminations of which Whitley writes in the previous chapter. Contactees and abductees get belted with beams of light all the time. And, just as we see in the Christian mystical literature, these lights change them, give them special powers, usher them into eternity (or telepathy), and call them to lives of prophetic witness.

We no longer speak of deification or "becoming divine," of course, but this is because our culture has changed, probably not because the lights themselves have. Indeed, I strongly suspect that contemporary abductees *do* experience "becoming a god" within these illuminations, but that they are too ashamed, or too scared, to tell us. I also suspect that they often lack an adequate framework through which to express this, *even to themselves*. They do not recognize or understand what is happening to them because our culture has grown cold and stupid when it comes to spiritual matters. Or spiritual matter.

I would go so far as to suggest that we *need* the older mystical ideas of the subtly material "spiritual body," the "energies of God," and the deifying light to really understand the contemporary UFO encounters. Which does not mean, of course, that we must adopt the older understandings and belief systems. We do not. Here again we must learn to practice the "future of the

past." We must learn to recalibrate our present through a careful and critical return to our past.

I think I first encountered the idea of the soul as a subtle material energy in Whitley's books. I did not at first understand or even recognize it, despite my earlier electric experience in Calcutta. The idea was just too new, too radical, too much. I needed another author to help me come to terms with what Whitley was saying. I needed Philip K. Dick.

A few years ago, one of my Ph.D. students, Erik Davis, asked me to join a team of scholars who were transcribing and editing Dick's massive *Exegesis*, his unpublished journals written roughly between 1974 and 1982, after his experience of Valis as cosmic mind. My role as an annotator of the selected passages was a humble and minor one. The effect of the journals on me was neither.

We have already encountered Dick's Valis experience. Dick believed that the entity that had zapped him in the winter of 1974 was a bio-linguistic plasma, that is, a living form of language-energy. I know that's confusing. It was confusing to Dick as well, who strained every word and every grammatical convention, who turned to every form of mystical literature he could find, who bent and broke time itself, in a brave effort to try to understand Valis. He failed. And that, he learned, was the final paradoxical function or purpose of the alien entity: to *say away* everything he thought.

The word "plasma" is all over *The Exegesis*. Dick, for example, describes a human being with whom the cosmic plasma has bonded (that is, himself) as a "homoplasmate." A homoplasmate is a kind of alien-human hybrid or, if you prefer, a deified human being. Like the apostle Paul and the monk Gregory, the sci-fi author was not being metaphorical. He meant something very real, something exotically physical. He was talking about *pneuma*, the subtly material "spirit" of the Gnostics. He considered himself to be such a secret Christian. He had been zapped, reprogrammed. He was a mutant. He was babbling about the plasmas and paradoxes of the energies of God.

Big Sur Real

I had one more encounter with the plasmas that prepared me for coming to terms with Whitley's ideas. This time it was gentler, more personal. I call the story "Big Sur Real."[90]

Stuart was a marvelous undergraduate student of mine, drawn to the history of American metaphysical religions, cognitive science, and, ultimately, a psychotherapeutic profession. By his own description, he is a rationalist. He considers popular treatments of the paranormal "lame." He thought of the brain as a kind of biological computer and consciousness as a form of "extended mind," that is, as an emergent property reliant on brain activity that also extends into the local environment.

That was before the glowing orbs.

The summer before his senior year, Stuart decided to become a work-scholar at the Esalen Institute in Big Sur, California. A work-scholar commits to one month of work at the institute—in the gardens, in the cabins, in the kitchen—during which he or she also studies with a visiting work-scholar teacher in the evenings. This was the cliff community that Stuart entered in July of 2010.

About halfway into the month there, something very strange happened. Around midnight outside their room, just above the back porch of the Lodge, Stuart was waiting for his roommate to take a pee. The two friends were planning to go down to the famous sulfur baths or hot springs of Esalen that sit below the cliff on the property's far southern tip. As he waited, he was doing pretty much nothing, kicking a few pebbles around and gazing down the anonymous alley between two rows of guest cabins.

Then it happened. What follows is how Stuart described the event at my request. Such an account is important for our conversation here, since it gives us an up-close and detailed description of these encounters, and from a psychologically and philosophically trained observer no less. Here is Stuart:

> *As I stood there looking straight into the alley I began to notice a rapid and significant change in my consciousness. I lost focus, and the air around me darkened into a thick black haze, unnoticeable except by sight. This misty haze made its way into my field of vision from the periphery towards the center of my*

visual field almost like tunnel vision, constricting my usual field to a small circle of clarity but in a less defined way—the darkness was slightly opaque, like an internal fog.

As I became aware of this lingering visual sensation, something began emerging from the ground a few feet in front of me. There's really no reasonable-sounding way to say it, but three softball-sized, golden orbs made of light rose up and out of the ground. I didn't move, but my attention was immediately redirected towards them, and my mind began to ease into a placid calm. Colored lighter than gold and dully luminescent, these spheres of light radiated a consistent glow. Roughly, they formed a triangle shape, the plane between them parallel to the ground. They were arranged with one about seven feet away, slightly to the right, one, say eight feet away, slightly to the left, and the final one nine feet away, right in the middle. They slowly rose to a height of about three feet and I looked down on them, captivated. They were beautiful. *They were* intentional. *In other words: I knew that they knew. Though at first part of my mind was aware of and thinking about the wildness and novelty of the experience, all of my cognitive resources soon shifted to an intense focus on the orbs. After a few seconds, I was totally immersed in them. While I had a vivid visual experience, I wasn't really* seeing *them so much as* feeling *them. It is difficult to describe, but I don't think I could have reached out and grabbed them; I just knew they were there, in front of me. I didn't move at all, and I didn't feel threatened. They induced in me an overwhelming calm and a peculiar serenity that I hadn't experienced before then, and haven't experienced since. I remember hoping that I could continue to be entranced by these magic golden orbs for a long time.*

My attention was broken by the slightest hint of a rattle on the door handle to room 9. [My roommate] was done and had placed his hand on the doorknob to come out. Immediately and without warning the orbs blinked away. No more fog, no more orbs, no more calm—nothing! They didn't even recede back into the ground. They simply blipped out of existence. The whole

experience probably lasted about two minutes. "Hey man." My roommate greeted me. "Hey," I responded, somehow casually. We started the short downhill walk to the baths and I didn't mention a thing.

In this same written report, Stuart continues to reflect on the experience. He notes that language is incapable of describing the event. It is the subject/object structure of language and normal perception that is the problem here. These, after all, were not simple "objects" that could have been seen by another witness, like an animal emerging from a cave at a zoo, he explains. Rather, as he puts it: "They weren't really seen, heard, or smelled. They appeared *to* me, but also somehow *in* me." Whatever they were, these balls of light shifted and brightened his experience of the cosmos. He notes that the stars that night down at the baths were different, somehow brighter than he had *ever* seen them.[91]

One of the most striking details of the event for Stuart was something that was not part of the event itself but which he discovered after the fact: such glowing orbs, it turns out, are fairly well known in the larger Big Sur community.[92] It was this "match" between his experience and the experiences of others that impressed him so. He had never heard of such glowing orbs, ever, and yet he had just had an experience that matched the other Big Sur reports in significant details. Stuart concluded that his own subjective experience of the glowing orbs was not simply subjective. In some sense, these orbs were a shared experience. They existed outside his own subjectivity. They were real.

There is one more historical context that seems important here: the grounds upon which Esalen sits and out of which the beautiful balls of light emerged is a Native American burial site.

Energetics

All of these extraordinary encounters with light forms, conscious plasmas, and energy beings bring us back to our earlier reflections on the trippy nature of the imagination. In what sense are these things "imagined," that is,

projected by our own subjectivities? And in what sense are they "real," that is, in what sense do they exist independently of our seeing them? Or are these the wrong questions?

Notice that all of those earlier reflections about the imagination were just that: reflections. They assumed a *visual* framework. They assumed light bouncing off or emanating from objects or, as we had it in my preferred metaphor, as images reflected in or through a two-way mirror.

The imagination, of course, is all about images. And images, like mirrors, always imply *distance*, that is, they always imply that what one is observing is separate from the act of observing it. If one *is* something, one cannot see it. One is it.

Similarly, the knowledge born of an image in a mirror is everywhere and always an indirect or distant knowledge. Like Kant's reasonable thing-in-itself, one can never get to the thing itself through sight or the image. One can only see it from afar. This visual distance, of course, is also the basis of modern reason and modern science, both of which need to create a "distance" between the subject and the object being reasoned about or measured. Hence the modern metaphor of "objectivity."[93] It's all about creating objects, which is to say: distance, separation, not us.

I recognize that this is a subtle point. But it is also a crucial point that changes pretty much everything. Consider the energetic states discussed in our previous chapters and here again in this one. Some of these involve images, for sure, but even here the seeing has changed. These altered states of energy take us out of the realm of distant objects or mirrored images into the much more immediate world of energy, vibration, electromagnetism, and light itself. Hence Whitley's descriptions of becoming an "electric body" and entering new "energetic levels of being," and of his cat yowling in pain as literal sparks shot between its paws and Whitley's palpably vibrating body. Hence "that Night" in Calcutta when I was radiated and inspired by unknown invisible energies. Hence Seong's "energy worms" that initiated him into a cosmic mind that took him almost two decades to find again, this time in some ancient Greek texts. Hence Jane's descriptions of the dissolution of visual forms, the collapse of the distinction between her eyes and the objects they were seeing, and the paradoxical event of becoming the light and energy of the world. Hence Phil getting

reprogrammed or mutated by the beaming light of Valis. Hence, finally, Stuart's balls of light that were not "objects" at all, that did not appear "to" him but "in" him.

None of these descriptions are reasonable or objective ones. And although many of them were accompanied by elaborate visionary phenomena, none of them are primarily about seeing anything at all. Rather, they are fundamentally about *becoming* something, or at least communing with something. My point? That in moments like these, the framework of reason and the object falls away as it is replaced, somehow, with a new network of resonance and energy. This "resonance" is also a kind of knowing, a most profound kind, but not of the sort that we are used to talking about with our words and grammar. To resonate with an energetic pattern or presence is not to see it from afar as an image or object. It is a kind of mutual "tuning" or "entrainment." It is a becoming. It is to become present with a presence.

Here, then, is our toolbox as it stands: the spiral of sophisticated *comparison*, the cut of *phenomenology*, the contextualizations of *history*, the quantumlike, communion-like interpretations of *hermeneutics*, an *erotics* pointing toward our own super sexualities, *the traumatic secret* of trauma, trance, and transcendence, and now a particular *energetics*, that is, a focus on the felt energies, powers, and entrainments of resonance. Is it any wonder that so many spiritual practices turn to the sonic drivers of dance, drum, chant, mantra, and song in order to remember, or hum again, the power and presence of this communion?

Comparative Practice with the Light

Since I began taking the plasmatic soul seriously, since I made this conceptual move from reason to resonance, I have had hundreds of encounters with the glowing orbs in the more humble form of my reading and comparative practices. One, after all, generally notices and looks for only what one is ready to see. Once I recognized the pattern, I began to look for it and saw it pretty much everywhere. These last two sections represent a few examples of this comparative practice with the light and its resonances across space and time.

Mark Fox has published a wonderful comparative study of spiritual encounters with light forms. He tracks some four hundred unpublished accounts from a large database begun by the British zoologist Sir Alister Hardy (1896–1985), who believed, by the way, that such mystical experiences were somehow involved in human evolution. These cases include, among many other bizarre stories, a Marian apparition in Yugoslavia, a UFO encounter on an American military base in England, and a silver band of light that zapped out of a television set as it appeared to a dying woman *and* her border collie.[94]

Fox's case studies are all modern. But light forms are known throughout the history of religions. Paul Marshall is a contemporary scholar of religion who has had his own modern mystical encounter, this time with a zig-zagging pattern of circular "little beings" that were somehow simultaneously both in him (recall Stuart's vision) and yet also exactly the same as he was, all-knowing and all-inclusive, the recognition of which triggered universal love. Paul calls this event the "vision of the rings."

Writing out of both the depths of this particular encounter and his own professional historical research, he is presently writing a marvelous comparative study and philosophical analysis of "globular beings," "fireball stories," and "soul spheres" in the history of Western philosophical and religious thought. Here he discusses circular halos, all-knowing eyes, luminous soul-vehicles moving in circular motions, shining bubbles, and spherical encasements or energy vehicles of the human form—so many "soul spheres." Hence the visions of figures like Ezekiel (whose chariot vision included "wheels-within-wheels" that were full of eyes); the Neoplatonists, who imagined the perfection of the soul as spherical; the medieval visionary abbess Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179), who reported incredibly detailed visions, including one of how circular souls enter the developed fetus; Dante's famous *Divine Comedy*, which describes a heavenly vision of souls as "a hundred little spheres" (*cento sperule*); and modern near-death experiences, like that recently reported by the neurosurgeon Dr. Eben Alexander. Paul also gestures to other religious tradition, citing, for example, the modern Hindu spiritual teacher Swami Muktananda (1908–1982), who famously taught, out of his own meditative experiences, that the divine Self is a "Blue Pearl."[95]

We can continue and extend these cross-cultural explorations. Glowing orbs have also been encountered in Africa and Latin America by professional anthropologists, where they are given numerous and conflicting interpretations by the local people, from the flight of witches or the battles of wizards and shamans, through ghost riders and spirits of buried treasure, to the omnipresent modern UFO. To take just two examples, the anthropologist Yves Marton reported a bright light about the size of a tennis ball that woke him from his sleep and filled him with states of plenitude and joy. More recently, the anthropologist Diego Escolar has given us a detailed report of some "anomalous luminous entities," or *luces*, that tracked and followed his research team through the mountains of Argentina for four hours. They all saw these objects, which appeared in different glowing sizes, from that of a soccer ball to about three meters in diameter. They were "tracking" the party and appeared to be clearly intelligent. The experience also included a dramatic temporal distortion, which altered the time that it should have taken to travel through a valley and reduced these four hours to an experienced one or one and a half.[96] Temporal distortions, of course, are extremely common in reports of UFO encounters.

The Revelation of the Magi, Then and Now

But if this is the case in the modern period, why not take them equally seriously in the historical record? Doesn't this "future of the past" once again change how we see and understand the past?

Orbs of light are quite common in the pre-modern world, and all around the world. For example, they are very common in the ancient Mediterranean world, particularly in Neoplatonism, where the soul's body of light, or "shining vehicle" (*augoeides ochema*), is reported as spheroid in shape. The historian of religions Ioan Couliano went so far as to describe this spherical soul-vehicle as a kind of ancient "space shuttle" traveling back and forth between the earthly body and outer space, where the gods were believed to inhabit, or *be*, the stars.

Living light forms are also described in many medieval and early modern records about the "materiality" of purgatory in Catholicism, here as mysterious flames or beings of light that allegedly left physical effects and were interpreted, at least by the officials of the tradition, as suffering souls in purgatory in need of prayer and the Church's mediation.[97] How different, and how much more inspiring, was Whitley's loving response to the "little flame" of his mother's soul that appeared in the photograph.

Then there is this. Consider the third-century apocryphal scripture *The Revelation of the Magi*. This remarkable text features a luminous entity appearing to the magi in a cave "in the land of Shir" (probably China), changing into the form of a glowing "small and humble" humanoid, and leading them, as the famous star, to travel to Bethlehem. There, in another cave, the light form is "born" as Mary and Joseph's infant son, still glowing radiantly.

The text abounds with those weird little details that raise the eyebrows of the comparativist. For example, thanks to the power of the star, the trip from Shir to Bethlehem is said to be "short and swift," as if time has deteriorated in the presence of a UFO. God is described as light "hidden by the great brightness of himself." And much like Stuart's encounter with the glowing orbs that were somehow "inside him," the bright star is said to be visible only to the magi.

Then there is the comparative practice of the star-child itself. The little star or glowing orb never actually identifies himself as Christ to the traveling magicians and makes startling statements like this: "I am everywhere, because I am a ray of light whose light has shone . . . in the entire world and in every land by unspeakable mysteries."[98] The star-child from the East, in other words, was proclaiming a kind of New Age wisdom about the deeper identity of the world's religions, *seventeen centuries ago*. The Ancient New Age again.

Now consider an e-mail I received from Whitley early in 2014. We were corresponding about a project that I was working on that involved my imaginal readings of his accounts. He wanted to push back against some of these readings. He wanted to emphasize the blunt physical nature of what he had experienced. He invoked the story he told earlier about his vision of a little bright star just outside his upstate New York cabin, which he had just

sold after his reputation had been ruined by the media assaults on his integrity and sanity and his book sales had plummeted.

Here is Whitley reflecting back on those encounters and that star-vision in the e-mail:

> And yet, you will remember that fellow I meditated with at our cabin, who would come crashing down onto the roof over the meditation room with six others, then sometimes materialize in the form of a small man in a tunic. I touched him. I held his hand. I smelled his skin. (He did not bathe, I found.) He indicated to me that he was from a level of being "between lives," but also that he was not dead—that I, in fact, was the one who was dead! His thought was that being plunged into the time-stream was death. That ours is the world of the dead and his, outside of the stream of time and able to observe it, is the world of the living.
>
> Who was he, then? Small. Six companions. The Seven Dwarfs!
>
> Some of my son's friends once came to the cabin and slept out in the woods. (They were teenagers, which explains this foolhardy act, I suppose.) They saw seven glowing balls of light moving through the woods. A couple of years later, on our last night at the cabin, when I asked to see him as he really was, he appeared as a little star hanging over the front yard. It was radiant, and the rays were like living light. They penetrated my skin, bringing with them the most intimate sense of human touch I have ever known. It was a moment of transcendent beauty and joy.
>
> The next morning, we left forever. I was impecunious, defeated by the wiles of the world and barely able to put food on our plates.[99]

I must add here that Philip K. Dick often came to the same conclusion from his Valis encounters, namely, that *we are dead,* and that the "dead" we see are actually the living. Whitley makes the same suggestion above. Charles Fort proposed the same "flip" almost a hundred years ago.

Whitley then goes on to reflect on the literary processes of memory and reframing that shaped his own accounts and continually reshape his understanding of them. He ends with a reference to his implant:

> Now, I know that I have recorded these things both in books and in letters to you before, but we are after those flickers are we not? Each time, it's a little different, a little new, I hope. (Both more right and, of course and as always, more wrong!)
>
> Before these experiences started in my life, I used to think of us as being inside Plato's cave. However, I have come to understand that we aren't inside the cave at all, but rather, we ARE the cave. And all of those shadows and all of that damned light cannot put Humpty-Dumpty together again.

But, alas, every time I gain the measure of the flickering and imagine that I have mastered it, I reach up and touch the implant in my ear and I think, oh dear!

Here, of course, we have another "Revelation of the Magi." We have another sphere of light and transcendent bliss, another shining vehicle of the soul, another glowing orb, another little star that can morph into a small dwarflike humanoid.

I do not, of course, know what all of this means, but I do not see how we can avoid the obvious similarities here. Surely, those echoing resonances across the millennia mean something, something that we have not even begun to recognize, much less try to understand.

Once we begin this comparative project, once we really practice this future of the past, I suspect that we will begin to see the world and ourselves in another light, literally. Perhaps we will see that the soul is a UFO, a little radiant star twinkling inside our heads and hearts that will lift off into who-knows-where when these carbon-based brains and bodies finally fail and fall away. I hope so.

16

Mythmaking

WHITLEY

Man know thyself; then thou shalt know the Universe and God.

Pythagoras

The human mind is a mythmaker. We do this because we need mirrors, and our myths are those mirrors. We use them to understand ourselves and to find meaning in the way we relate to the world around us. In ancient times, myths and stories were used to explore psychological states, desires, fears, and needs. Many myths are warnings about psychological territory that is dangerous to enter. The story of Oedipus explores unresolved desire for the mother, which is also a significant factor in my own personal life, obviously—normally hidden, but visible, for some reason, in me. The story of Thyestes reflects the desire to dominate one's children, even to kill them. Stories such as that of Persephone's descent into the underworld are an attempt to grapple with death, and to reconcile our own mortality with the fact that so much of life, dying in the fall and being resurrected in the spring, seems immortal. It is why Jesus supplanted the pagan Green Man, a resurrection deity, in much of Europe. "April is the cruelest month,

breeding lilacs out of the dead land." So beautiful is spring, but so heartrending.

But surely, with our modern understanding of human psychology and the brain and the comparative study of mythology and religion, we're past all that. No more mythmaking. We understand ourselves too well.

But, in fact, we do not. The more deeply we plumb the psyche, the deeper the well appears to go. Somewhere down in there, it would appear that there is a place where the line between the physical and nonphysical blurs, where imagination and reality somehow converge, and events unfold that are not yet understood at all. It is the realm of Jeff's "imaginal," where the electrons of thoughts somehow converge into the molecules of things. But how? The mind knows, but not, perhaps, in ways that it can articulate, or perhaps that it cares to articulate. If we could control this uncanny transference, after all, we would be living in an entirely different world, ruled by laws far more salubrious than the ones we must follow now. Perhaps in Eden such blessings flowed. Here, in the real world, we have only echoes in the form of impossible events that sometimes happen.

I had a friend, an acerbic radio host named Morton Downey Jr., who had dreadful teeth. He looked like a Pacu, the fish with human teeth. One night, he was driving on an isolated road when he was forced by a sudden fog to stop. Shadowy figures came around the car, and he was taken out into a region of light. He blacked out, only to discover when the fog lifted and he woke up in the car, that his teeth were now perfect.

How I loved that story. Alien dentists, though, or the promise of the imaginal? Nevertheless, miracles do happen, but so infrequently and arbitrarily. Why can we not turn the magic on at will? Just as we are now mystified by why cancer sometimes disappears on its own, we don't now know how the imaginal works, or, for that matter, if it is even responsible for things like Mort's good luck. But surely it is accessible to study—unless, of course, it was indeed dentists from another world, or even the future, who knows? I will say that, knowing his story, it was hard to do a face-to-face interview with him. I was so fascinated by his teeth that I'd keep losing the thread of the conversation.

Until the nineteenth century, western mythological figures were generally either monsters of one sort or another, or human in form. Their powers were generally somewhat greater than those of the people who had

conceived them, but, just like ordinary men, they were subject to the laws of nature and the punishments of the gods. In fact, there was an eloquent warning about violating them expressed in many myths. Icarus flew too near the sun, and his falling cry haunts us still. Prometheus gave us fire, which is the foundation of humankind's power over nature. His punishment was dolorous indeed. Atlas Telamon, having been on the losing side of a fracas with the Olympians, was condemned to hold up the world.

The world was dangerous, but not overwhelming. Nature was usually comprehensible and predictable, if also generally harsh.

When the industrial revolution came along, for the first time, many millions of people began to lose touch with seasonal, predictable life. They found themselves overpowered by a strange new world, seasonless, unnatural, and terrifyingly powerful. Cities expanded, sucking up the old countryside into a maze of dirty streets, becoming the gigantic mechanical clockworks that we see to this day. The soul seemed to have disappeared into the machine.

It was out of this milieu that the idea of the superman emerged. The wise, fierce, and complex Athena burst from the head of Zeus, but it was the superman, as ominous a figure as ever conceived, that burst from the mind of Friedrich Nietzsche three millennia later. The superman was bold, furious, and terrible. He was bigger and more powerful even than the grinding mechanism of roaring factories and human anger that now surrounded us, even more powerful when amplified as the whistling bomb and the stuttering machine gun. He was not like Achilles with his disappointing heel, but invulnerable to nature. He had to be, because if he was vulnerable to nature, then he must also be vulnerable to the greater forces of the poisonous factory, the bullet, and the bomb. He was a cleansing agent who would sweep away all that was unjust and inhuman.

He was no hero, but he was the inspiration for one—in fact, for a whole genre of superheroes who have turned out to be almost literally addictive, so starved are we for the illusion of empowerment.

During *X-Men Origins: Wolverine*, I walked down to the front of the crowded theater and looked back at the faces of the audience. As the screen flickered with mayhem and gushed with blood, I found myself looking into a sea of smiles. This is not always true, but people do feel a weight lifting when the X-Men defeat what, in the real world, cannot be defeated. They

do it with powers of mind that, in some sense, many of us hope might be real—and which do touch at the edges of our lives, offering hints of super nature.

I found myself so attracted to these figures that I bought a copy of *X-Men* #1 twenty years ago. Possessing it pleased me. Now, of course, it has turned out to have been an excellent investment.

By the early part of the twentieth century, we were beginning to be able to observe myths forming within ourselves. Sigmund Freud's work enabled us to see that we had an unconscious, and to shine the light of insight into those dark places. In *The Red Book*, Carl Jung explored his own underworld in a completely new way, penetrating into it with words rather than leaving it as the unseen basis of his consciousness.

What we did not know is that the unconscious is apparently a house of many rooms, and some of them, it would seem, are occupied by presences that did not care to be exposed to the light of science. They sought for a new way to make myth.

Across the 1930s, as the economy foundered, the world was overwhelmed by waves of helplessness. Late in the decade, the creative community began a process that continues to this day. Beginning with Superman in 1938 and Batman a year later, it injected one hero after another into the entertainment culture.

Why did this happen? The reason was simple: comic book artists were coming up with new ideas all the time, and exposing them in comics on the nation's newsstands. Superman sold well, which led to Batman, then to the explosion of superheroes that followed in the 1940s.

But these were not like the heroes of the past, vulnerable and conflicted. Superheroes are moral perfectionists who are universally dedicated to the welfare of the helpless. Superheroes don't pout like Achilles. They aren't neurotic gods like Zeus. Their enemies reflect the evils we all face, with emphasis on corruption and organized crime—the two areas of criminal activity that make the public feel most helpless.

The 1940s involved the most terrible war ever known, which ended with the emergence of a weapon so fearsome that it was not difficult to believe that it might destroy souls, and with them the entire world. And then

there was the Holocaust, orchestrated by cultists in black uniforms decorated with the death's head, who had proclaimed themselves supermen, and did indeed reflect the ruthlessness of Nietzsche's prototype, if not his morality.

After the war, the superheroes slowly faded. Every American was a hero. We were victorious. Supermen, all. But then came the cold war, followed in the 1960s and 1970s by an increasing sense of personal helplessness, that has risen to the quiet epidemic of frustration that we see today. And with it, the superheroes have returned, bringing with them ever more engaging superpowers—the imaginal at war with the cruel, grinding mystery of the real world in deeply satisfying ways.

Into this building cultural storm there came something completely unexpected. On June 24, 1947, a man called Kenneth Arnold, among other things an amateur pilot, informed the air force and the media that he had observed a formation of silver craft flying past Mount Rainier at the remarkable speed of twelve hundred miles per hour.

In a world desperate for some sort of salvation, there was now a new story, and not only that, one that looked as if it might promise some sort of deliverance. The story was being told in headlines, but also in the very ancient language that we use to address the unknown. Such stories develop along lines familiar across history: strange experiences are reported, tales are told, myths are spun, beliefs emerge. If the beliefs are eventually ritualized into religious practice, then they gain persistence, usually for a few hundred or up to a few thousand years.

During that period, also, the horrendous "Randolph" experience entered my life, a true descent into darkness that would forever rip off the door of myth within me, leaving me vulnerable before sinister and little understood presences, inner and, it would seem, outer. Later, I would add my own terror to the public mythmaking process, with results far beyond anything I or anybody else might have expected. The myth of the alien, which came boiling up to the surface in me, turned out to also be hidden deep inside millions of people, where it had been secretly deposited by an unknown process.

Instead of the mysterious power of the gods to inspire belief, we now have the mysterious power of aliens. In the 1950s, they were "space brothers," possessed of the wisdom of the gods. But from the moment the

Betty and Barney Hill case was described in John Fuller's *Interrupted Journey* in 1966, the narrative moved in a radically new direction. The Hills reported a terrifying encounter on a lonely New England road. They had no direct memory of it, but Betty called Pease Air Force Base to report the UFO they recalled seeing. They weren't experts. They had no believability. Their report was dismissed as a sighting of the planet Jupiter.

Maybe aliens were there and maybe not. But something unknown was provably present: our inner mythmaker had discovered a new way to sound from the dark within, its ancient dirge of mortality, that most poignant and true of all human cries.

The Hills were interviewed by an investigator from the National Investigations Committee on Aerial Phenomena. They also began suffering from nightmares sufficiently disturbing to cause them to seek medical help. They were placed under hypnosis by Dr. Benjamin Simon, whereupon a bizarre and frightening narrative emerged. They recalled being taken aboard a strange machine that had approached their car out of the night sky. Aboard were a number of humanoid creatures, the same sort of gray creatures with appalling eyes that I would also confront in the night a few hundred miles away and twenty years later. Betty remembered seeing a star map that an amateur astronomer eventually decided indicated that the creatures and their craft had come from the Zeta Reticuli star system.

They became known as the Zetas, then later, the Grays. They weren't godlike, either, but ambiguous figures who slipped through the night stealing people and, as rumor had it, not always returning them. But they also gained a reputation for wisdom, and thus present an equivocal picture.

Because it is equivocal, it can serve the same purpose as older myths. It can be used by the mind as a tool for inner exploration, at once drawing hidden fears to the surface, rekindling the sense of wonder that the modern world has stolen from us, and giving individuals a much needed feeling of value: they may be the tiniest specks in an ocean of humanity, but, by God, the aliens are interested in them.

This modern retelling of the old story acquired another novel layer. The gods now not only flew around in spaceships, they weren't gods at all, but scientists from another planet interested in us as experimental subjects. Unremarked was the fact that the Grays were, in appearance, strikingly similar to the fairy folk of Northern Europe. Also like them, they were

frightening, came out of the night, and abducted people. I might note in passing that the majority of our correspondents had last names suggesting Scotch or Irish descent. What this might mean I don't know, but, as is true of most of this material, there must be an as yet unknown significance. It was not a matter of 10 or 15 percent of the correspondents having recognizably Scots-Irish names. In the random sample we took of five hundred names, it was 55 percent. This kind of ethnic specificity, coupled with the abundant fairy lore common among the Celtic peoples means something, it must. But what? Hopefully, we'll eventually decide that knowledge of the fairy and UFO lore should not be rejected, and try to make sense of it.

We have a habit of assuming that myths and folktales are confabulations. That is not my experience of the UFO lore. As I have repeated a number of times in this text, there is a consistency of innocent witness that makes that conclusion impossible, at least for me. Additionally, many, many of the letters we received involved complex multiple witness encounters. Plainly, whatever is happening, it is not "all in the mind." Or, if it is, then, as I have said, the mind is not all in us.

This new nascent folktale was at its core very like the older ones. Strange things were seen by Mr. Arnold. His report evolved into the myth of the flying saucer. More strange things were seen—dozens, thousands, waves of them. But there was a modern difference. This time, it was not so easy to dismiss the reports, or to keep them confined to mythical realms—or rather, to keep the mythical confined to mental realms. When these angels flew, we sometimes had cameras and, in a few cases, observers of exceptional quality such as NASA expert Paul Hill joined the witnesses, contributing his own exquisitely detailed sighting narratives. In his book about his observations, *Unconventional Flying Objects,* he offers expert descriptions of some multiple-witness UFO sightings in which he participated. His sightings remain among those listed by the U.S. Air Force in Project Blue Book as unknown. And it should be remembered that the press misinterpreted the air force's conclusions in Blue Book. They did not say that UFOs didn't exist. They said that they weren't a matter for the United States Air Force to be concerned about.

Although the U.S. Air Force was quick to dismiss the Betty and Barney Hill case (and some observers made the claim that Barney Hill's

report was a nightmare caused by the tensions he felt from his interracial marriage), another modern aspect of it soon amplified its power far beyond what might have happened in the past. This was the John Fuller book, and, above all, its excerpt in *Look* magazine, which was read by millions, including me.

I remember how chilling it was at the time. I was just entering young adulthood, and it caused me to feel a curious but intense nostalgia and deep uneasiness. I was not aware of any memories, but fears haunted my nights and I suffered from a strange sort of vigilance that would immediately startle me awake when an uneasy breeze rattled the leaves or a car whispered past the house too slowly, or a rabbit screamed in the night.

With the publication of the *Look* magazine excerpt, the alien abduction narrative collided with the UFO narrative, and the two combined into the modern story.

As only the surface of the modern world is different from the surface of the past, while the interior, human impulses remain the same, so also the new myth is different from its predecessors, but only on the surface. It is different not so much in the way that it is revealing itself, but in the way it is being seen. It is not different in how it functions in the culture.

Just as the modern world, with its great cataracts of traffic, its glaring lights, its airplanes and skyscrapers, looks different from the past, the UFO narrative sounds different from earlier folk narratives. In both cases, the difference is a reflection of our expanding technology and science. Flying saucers appear to be machines. They come from the sky. They contain peculiar creatures. Ergo, they must be spaceships from another planet, and their inhabitants, obviously, are aliens.

They are not perceived as gods. There are only a few UFO cults, and they are small. You don't find many people praying to the Grays, although there are those, like me, who have found wisdom from a relationship with them. Whatever they are, they are hard and uncompromising, and there is that unavoidable—and very real—sense of danger. Like owls, they are ominously beautiful, but also predatory creatures of the night.

Prior to my 1985 encounter, I would have scoffed at the believability of the UFO/alien narrative, but not at its logic. Given the age and immensity of the universe and the apparent profusion of planets of all sorts, life elsewhere is statistically inevitable, and intelligent life probably occurs

from time to time. But, while I am quite sure that parts of the close encounter experience unfold outside of the mind, the way that the myth of the other is integrated into culture over such a long period of history, in different forms, each appropriate to its period, tells me that it is something other than alien scientists studying us.

Could it really involve intelligent beings from elsewhere in the universe?

Based on the way the human experience is unfolding, I would guess that intelligent life is usually a short-lived biological phenomenon, so it's probably pretty rare, but if anybody has ever immortalized themselves by establishing an extensive presence outside of their home planet, who knows what they might have been able to achieve over time?

Although I have been identified as an advocate for belief in an alien presence on Earth—and have, at times, entertained such an advocacy—I have never been comfortable with it. This is because it is so far unsupported by unimpeachable evidence. The evidence, though, does support the notion that something other than the shadows within us are generating this story. It is, in other words, a story with an external component, but clearly not one that we understand. Given this, I find it very strange that we seem unwilling to even try to take an objective look at it.

It might involve aliens, who knows? It's not entirely inside the mind, that seems clear enough if the physical evidence is faced for what it is.

The first report of an apparent alien spacecraft in the Western canon was made by the prophet Ezekiel. What he actually observed is impossible to know, but his description is very like many modern UFO reports. In fact, the whole "ancient alien" canon has added yet another dimension to the evolving myth. But the question "If they have been here for thousands of years, why?" is never asked.

The sighting aspect of the story not only has an ancient provenance, it continues to appear from time to time across history, the ship from the sky, but then, in the modern world, it suddenly goes from a smattering of observations to an avalanche. Is this because the activity increased, or because communications are now better, or both? Not only that, it is accompanied by the Grays with their abductions, sexual intrusions, and implantations, and there is nothing that spreads a story faster than fear. Additionally, there are now the high-level narratives such as that of Paul

Hill, the photography, the vast amount of witness testimony, and the implants.

Or, to put it another way, our story has been made as convincing to us on our terms as those of the past were to our predecessors. We have always assumed that myth only came out of the mind, but, looking at this modern manifestation closely and objectively, it is clear that this is not true now, and perhaps has never been true.

It is crucial to understand this. The story still belongs to us, just as it always has, but now we can see that it isn't entirely imaginary. As much as we might like to believe otherwise, an objective view must accept that there are UFO sightings that have passed every test for believability, that the implants cannot be explained, and that the vast number of people claiming close encounters are having an experience that we cannot yet identify.

Our difficulty with this comes when we take a step too far and begin making claims about the phenomenon that are unsupportable, either that it is without substance or that it must be alien contact. It is simply not yet time for this debate.

We respond to this new narrative as story, either believing or disbelieving. But, just as the story has acquired a convincing underpinning of expert witness and physical evidence, we have also acquired both scientific and intellectual tools that enable us to study it in a completely new way. By "intellectual," I mean the comparative study of mythology in anthropology, history, and the study of religion—in other words, exactly what Jeff is doing here.

If we step back from the debate and start approaching the story as a cultural artifact, and analyzing its physical manifestations objectively and without preconception, we can make significant progress in finally understanding not only the alien contact story, but conceivably all of the supernatural, or more accurately, super natural. But it is going to require larger-scale thinking than we habitually apply to the subject.

Prior to the publication of *Communion,* I had not the faintest idea that the close encounter experience was present in the culture to the extent that it was. Nobody did. The explosive response to the book caused it to rush onto the bestseller list, and then the avalanche of letters started, and I have to say that I was shocked to my very depths to see the power of what I had unleashed.

Communion's advocacy on behalf of the ambiguity of the experience was swept away in a cacophony of claims and counterclaims. I ended up in the middle of the strident debate between believers and disbelievers. As I was neither, my position was tenuous.

In part, people were simply too excited to see my book for what it was. My close friend, the experimental psychologist Dr. John Gliedman, the husband of NPR reporter and author Margot Adler, warned me that this might happen. He was one of the most dynamic intellectuals I ever met. He accompanied me every step of the way through the *Communion* experience. He and Margot were among the first people to whom I told my story.

After reading the manuscript, he said, "People are going to take this as a claim of alien contact." I disagreed, pointing out the theme of the book. He said, "Your writing's too vivid. Nobody's going to see the theme. They're going to see the aliens." That was why I added, in large type, in the front of the book, the sentence about the human mind winking back from the dark.

It didn't help, obviously, with the result that, in 1989, Janet Maslin would begin her review of the film adaptation of *Communion* with the phrase, "Whitley Strieber's *Communion*, an account of Mr. Strieber's firsthand experiences with extraterrestrials . . ." She goes on to rage a good bit about me and that little movie, but the point here is that she begins with exactly the assumption that Dr. Gliedman warned me about, and she is a distinguished and discriminating reviewer. When I saw that review, I understood that my failure was total. It was one thing to fall victim to TV personalities looking for sensation, but this meant that the broader intellectual community I had hoped to reach had also been blinded to my theme by my prose.

I had also failed to detect the level of revulsion that the intellectual community had for the subject of alien contact. I didn't understand that the emotions involved are powerful enough to overwhelm logic. The idea of a far more advanced "other" that observes us without contacting us is extremely intimidating to anybody involved in the process of expanding our intellectual content and scientific knowledge.

Above all, I did not understand what was roiling under the surface—unknown to the cultural leadership, in fact, much as Christianity was ignored by the Roman elite in the first and second centuries, or the

movement of Islam in its hinterlands remained unknown to the Byzantine leadership in Constantinople a few hundred years later.

But cultural change is like that. It comes from below. Perhaps Ms. Maslin was touching a nerve of her own when she offered the opinion that I had a "gift for framing his visions in terms that readily appeal to the popular imagination, at a level only slightly higher than the one reached by supermarket tabloids." Perhaps a bit unfair, but an eloquent cri de coeur, to be sure, and for a good reason. It would take very little, just now, to transform the UFO cult into a powerful new faith. A flying saucer hanging over Washington for a few hours would do it.

That happened over Lima, Peru, in February of 2015, but went unremarked not because it wasn't a genuine mystery, but because it was possible to ignore it. A very strange UFO appeared over Camarillo, California, at around Thanksgiving time for six years running, and was expertly videotaped through a Celestron telescope by filmmaker Steve Neill, but that was also ignored. In fact, indisputable UFO events happen fairly frequently, but they are always ignored, not because they should be, but by tacit mutual consent, as the more comfortable way to deal with them.

As hundreds of thousands of close encounter narratives came pouring in, Anne and I found ourselves witness to what is certainly one of the most intense reactions to a book that has ever taken place. We were horrified. If this was contact, then what were we to make of it? What could it mean that it would unfold like this, a bizarre experience in the night, terrifying and enigmatic, devastating the lives of so many of these people?

While I was writing *Communion*, I had done research into the UFO and alien phenomena. I had seen that there was a debate, but I had not seen how strident it was, let alone that there appeared to be, of all things, government involvement in it. And none of the debaters had the faintest idea of what was happening in the cultural background, that this vast number of people was involved.

The presence of a level of official concern was disturbing to me. Had not the air force said that it had no interest? I thought to myself that aliens might actually be here, and the air force might be lying. The most telling—and disturbing—fact that I uncovered was that NASA had prevented Paul Hill from publishing his book during his lifetime. Reading it, I could see

that he had intended to make the manuscript public after retirement. Instead, his daughter had found it among his effects when he died.

Thus there were powerful forces that did not want a man of his authority to enter the debate on the side of the UFO believers.

Later, I think I discerned the reason, which is an extremely odd one, almost funny, certainly pitiful. After the publication of *Communion,* my uncle, Colonel Edward Strieber, introduced me to his friend General Arthur Exon, who proceeded to tell me, in regard to the Roswell incident, that "everyone from Truman on down knew that what we had found was not of this world within twenty-four hours of our finding it." When I asked him about the secrecy, his answer was quite revealing. He said that he had heard that a memo had been written in the early fifties speculating in a quite unsettling way about why there had been no invasion after the surge of UFO sightings that began in 1947. The memo, he said, theorized that obscure laws of physics might prevent them from entering our reality without first convincing us that they were real, and that official admission might be the tripwire that would enable them to come through.

Obviously not aliens in the conventional sense, then. If we can land on the moon and Mars, if they managed to get here, they could surely land in a conventional way. What did the author of this memo, possibly Dr. John von Neumann, think they were, then? That question the general could not answer.

Von Neumann was certainly interested in aliens. In thinking about how travel around the galaxy might be accomplished, he posited what has come to be called the von Neumann Machine. This would be a self-replicating device that would seed the species that developed it whenever it found a suitable planet.

However, it was his work on the quantum perception problem that might have been germane to the memo. If parallel universes exist, and that's where our visitors come from, then it's conceivable that they might need us to believe in them before they can become invested in our reality. If so, then the whole vast UFO and close encounter experience could be a sort of military operation designed to open the door in our minds from their side.

All very interesting and a possible explanation for the government's continued blanket denial. Even without knowing whether or not the

speculation had substance, no government official could ever risk opening that door.

Could actual, physical parallel universes exist? If so, it doesn't seem beyond the realm of possibility that the mind might in some way mediate communication among them. Certainly, something that we do not understand is happening. But one still has to ask, what on earth might it have to do with the military?

After going on a long journey of research into this question, much of which was narrated in my book *Confirmation*, I have come to the conclusion that, while the military and intelligence agencies are indeed hiding something in regard to this subject, they don't know what it is, or have misunderstood it. But their secrecy is a major input that is energizing belief in aliens. The more they obfuscate and deny, the more the public becomes convinced that what they're denying is true.

The first element energizing the myth, of course, is the strangeness and excitement of the narrative: A UFO sighting or a close encounter is a riveting event in any life. This hidden current of witness, which is enormous, remains to this day almost entirely unexamined in any objective manner at all.

The second is the public conversation, which is largely ghettoized in the UFO community. Most of the people involved are entirely sincere, but the community is a social isolate, dealing as it does in rejected knowledge.

The huge volume of mail that we received was a shock, but there was something else there, which has come, over the years, to seem truer and truer: there is, concealed in the structure of the reports, something that looks very much like a plan. But, as always, it's not possible to make a definite determination.

I pointed out in *Solving the Communion Enigma* that we might act in very much the same way that our visitors are acting, were we to reach a planet inhabited by a less advanced intelligent species. Our anthropologists would demand that we conceal ourselves, so as to not disturb their culture and ruin our chance to study it. This would be especially true if the scientific gap was great, and essential if they were fundamentally less intelligent. For example, there is no way that we can ever communicate the meaning of our world to a lower primate. Nothing we can say or do can explain the reality of our lives to a creature that cannot even understand

what clothing is. To study, often to protect such creatures, we anesthetize them, abduct them, fit them with tracking devices, sometimes treat them medically, then return them to their habitats. Some of us hunt them. A fringe of the disturbed torment them.

As we approach wild creatures, they struggle, they react with terror, they have to be subdued . . . exactly as I did, initially. But over my years of contact, I was tamed. Now I am only afraid, not helplessly panicked and flailing dangerously. To get to this point took mutual effort. They tamed me, and I tamed myself.

Once, after I had been dealing with the phenomenon for about five years, a blurry, indistinct figure appeared in our bedroom door in our cabin in upstate New York, then rushed toward me. Anne and I were both awake reading. I erupted, threw my book up in the air, grabbed the little table beside the bed and hurled it at the thing, smashing the table to bits. I cried out, "You'll never get me! You'll never get me!" Anne threw her book up in the air and screamed, too. She saw nothing.

One would assume that this was a waking dream. But the next day I received a call from my brother. He had been playing his guitar in bed in San Antonio when a figure had appeared at the foot of the bed. He reacted by throwing the costly and much loved guitar at it. The thing seemed to leap out of the top of his bedroom window.

He told me his story and added that he'd found a circle of glass cut out of the top of the window. There were three places where shards of the glass seemed to be missing, but otherwise it was intact. He said that he'd gotten a message, or had a feeling, that I needed to be careful or somebody might get hurt. When I told him what had happened to me, like Jeff's friend Dan who had discovered that his honey jar had mysteriously migrated into his tin of flour, we were helplessly perplexed.

Next, I got a call from a friend who had just come home from a trip. He was well read in the *Communion* book, and had had some odd experiences himself. He had been surprised to find three shards of glass on the floor inside his locked apartment. He called me to tell me about it because he'd had the feeling that it had something to do with me.

So, did an alien approach me, then when I reacted badly zip down to San Antonio to deliver his oblique message through my brother, then

somehow convey three shards of glass to the apartment of my friend, or was it something else entirely?

Eventually, perhaps, we'll look at events like that in a large enough context to actually study them. Just now, though, all that can be done is to describe them, not explain them.

The past feared its gods, we fear our visitors. I wonder, have they emerged out of the old story, or are they a new arrival of some sort who have very cleverly fitted themselves into it, or perhaps been fitted into it by us? Could it be that any approach like this, whether imaginary, imaginal, or real is going to cause us to respond by mythologizing it?

I have certainly played my part on this particular stage. To a degree, this has been because of my writing. In part, also, it's because of my desire to explore different possibilities, which has sometimes caused me to range too far from the question. This has helped open the door to the assumption that I'm claiming contact with extraterrestrials, not reporting perceptions, that I have, as it were, failed to "make the cut" that Jeff encourages in chapter 2.

One thing that we noticed at once about our letter mail was that the great majority of the reports came from the 1970s. There were a few from as early as the 1930s, but the spike during the '70s was notable. There were many fewer stories from the 1960s, and from the early '80s on, they have continued to decline steadily. Now, on my website, I get perhaps two or three reports a week, and, once again, most of them are memories of things that happened in the '70s.

Were we somehow approached then, by something that has moved on? Perhaps they were indeed alien scientists, who concluded their studies here, or were drawn elsewhere by a more interesting species. Or is it that the initial interest the book generated has worn off, and people aren't bothering to make reports anymore?

Unfortunately, we cannot know, not without more facts, and unless the climate changes dramatically, we will never know. But myth is like that: it resists study. Our fears live in the dark, and from time immemorial, that's where we have processed them. I am hoping that by collaboration between, for example, psychologists and mythologists, we will finally succeed in pointing the way to a vision of the phenomenon that is broad enough and objective enough to be worth contemplating.

Ideally, both the National Science Foundation and the National Humanities Foundation would see fit to encourage granting in the area. Since it's not clear that science can do more at this point than confirm the existence of the enigma, it seems that the humanities are of enormous importance if we are ever to gain the perspective we need to advance our knowledge of it.

Jeff sees the engagement of the humanities as of primary importance, but I think that science has a role to play, too. It can do things like observe activity in the sky in a methodical way, study the brain function of close encounter witnesses, study the implants, and so forth. While this cannot answer the question of what, at its core, is happening, it can confirm that something is taking place that, if not real in an absolute sense, is present outside of the imagination, if not entirely independent of it. But if we are ever to evolve ways of talking about it that lead to understanding, comparative mythologists and experts in religion are going to need to engage exactly as Jeff is engaging. It is through their work that a useful way of talking about it will evolve. In our discussions, Jeff has offered the opinion that scientists dismiss myth as being inaccessible to their methods of study. I would agree that the scientific establishment has no way of addressing them except through the narrow slit of psychology, but I think that there is potential for a sea-change in this area.

This is because of what has been known, since David Chalmers coined the phrase in 2009, as the Hard Problem, specifically, the Hard Problem of Consciousness. Consciousness is inlooking, and we look into ourselves through the dark glass of myth. I am confident that science will find ways of walking those inner pathways with tools that perhaps have not even been invented yet. When they do, they will find trail markers. These markers will have been left by comparative mythologists.

There is, of course, a huge danger here and a pitfall. It is that, if science is engaged in this way and, say, does determine that any part of the phenomenon is physically real, the public is liable to jump to the same conclusion that they jumped to because of the way I described the *Communion* experience. They are going to come to believe that scientists are saying that aliens are real.

But if we are ever going to know ourselves, we need to know our myths—truly know them and how they come about, not simply argue about

them. This is especially true of this new myth, which is by historical standards extremely powerful, is capable of exploding into the cultural foreground at any time, and has the potential to change our world completely. Before that happens on its own, we need to make an effort to understand, so that we can use the forces it is unleashing for the betterment of our lives and our world. We need, finally, to recognize that we have been willfully ignoring this chance to know more of ourselves by pretending that the most provocative evidence doesn't exist. It is time to open the door to the chamber of the mythmaker, and at last see who lives within.

17

The Mythical Object

JEFF

Anybody may theorize upon other worlds and conditions upon them that are similar to our own conditions: if his notions be presented undisguisedly as fiction, or only as an "interesting hypothesis," he'll stir up no prude rages.

Charles Fort, *The Book of the Damned*

Whitley articulates a number of important positions in the previous chapter. Among these is the conclusion that the U.S. military and government do not understand the UFO phenomenon, and that their secrecy, whatever its motivations, is feeding the mythology. He observes that a small collection of communities have formed around the stories and secrecies, but that these are generally isolated and marginalized by the broader culture since they are embracing a form of rejected knowledge. And he notes that we now possess both scientific and intellectual tools to study the formation of such mythologies and communities that no previous culture possessed. All of these conclusions, it seems to me, are very good ways to move the conversation forward.

But there is one consistent thread through our conversations here that reveals a basic disagreement or difference between the two of us. Whitley, or so it seems to me, often appears to think that science is the way forward,

that science has what it takes, that more science will somehow be able to crack this mystery.

I am very skeptical of this. I think the science is crucial, of course, but I do not think it is enough, or ever will be. It is my own position that the tools of the humanities—and particularly those of the study of religion and anthropology—are much more promising and, frankly, much more powerful in this particular arena.

It is patently obvious to me, for example, why the U.S. military and government do not understand something like the UFO phenomenon—because it is not a military or technological object, because it is a *mythical object*. And I intend that phrase in the most paradoxical sense possible, that is, in the sense of something seen or physically encountered that is actually a materialized story or meaning. I mean a thing that is also a thought. I mean a friggin' story that shows up on radar.

Put differently, these spectral encounters participate in both the material and the mental. They are objective *and* subjective at the same time. They are expressions of the one world we encountered at the end of chapter 15. Like the bizarre objects of that previous chapter (the implant, the magical stone, and the honey jar), they are props in a drama. They pull us into their stories, even as we tell them ours. Whitley gets this just right when he writes: "We have always assumed that myth only came out of the mind, but, looking at this modern manifestation closely and objectively, it is clear that this is not true now, and perhaps has never been true. It is crucial to understand this. The story still belongs to us, just as it always has, but now we can see that it isn't entirely imaginary."

If you want to understand mythical objects, you go to the people who know something about these things. You go to people who have given their lives to studying and understanding the global history and functions of mythology and mysticism. You go to anthropologists, literary critics, and scholars of comparative religion. John Keel saw this almost fifty years ago now in his pioneering book *UFOs: Operation Trojan Horse* (1970). He pointed out there that it was foolish to turn to engineers in order to understand something in the sky whose true meaning lay in the souls of the contactees and the rich history of Western esotericism.

Here is the catch, though. People who study mythology and comparative mystical literature, people like me, are almost universally

allergic to accepting the possibility that these subjects might be real objects, that they might have some physical, or parapsychical, existence outside the subjective imaginations of the individuals and cultures that construct, ritualize, and turn them into social and political institutions.[100] This is probably a premature conclusion on our part, but that is where we are at the moment.

In other words, Whitley's faith in science and my faith in the humanities are probably both misplaced. Neither can really deliver the goods here.

So what to do?

Well, we can begin by simply admitting our ignorance. We can also recognize the likelihood that this ignorance is not a moral one, that it is not somehow "our fault." It is much more likely a perfectly natural or cognitive condition, that is, a function of how we are put together, how we are "wired," as people like to say today, entranced as they are with computers and smart phones.

As a partial response to Whitley's implant, I discussed the spiritual practice of saying away our deepest convictions and beliefs as relative historical products and as constructs of human language and grammar and, deeper still, as biological consequences of our neurological hardware and sensory system. As a result of our cultural software (read: our languages, grammars, social customs, and beliefs) and our neurological hardware (read: our nervous system, senses, and brain), we are *constantly* equating what we believe or perceive for what is. These constant, unconscious acts need to be named for what they are: mistakes.

Our religious symbols, for example, may or may not *point to* some aspect of ultimate reality, but they are not literally true and should never be taken as absolutely accurate. This is the fundamental lesson of the comparative study of religion. It is also the fundamental mistake that the religions have repeatedly made throughout recorded history: their believers have too often (not always) confused coded cultural memories of real encounters with *something* as literal and perfectly accurate descriptions of *everything*. Much too often, they have forgotten, or simply have not known, that every religious truth is a mediated one, and so also a relative one. They have confused the filter with the filtered, the medium with the mediated, the

prism with the light (not unlike the conventional neuroscientists who today confuse the brain with mind). As a result, they have ended up idolizing their own local languages, their scriptural texts, their mythologies, and their local social practices and moral values, none of which are or ever can be universal. They remain entranced.

Such moves, of course, are not simply abstract philosophical mistakes or innocent psychological errors. When these sorts of conflations between appearance and reality, between something and everything, are linked to authoritarian institutions and exclusivist ideologies, they also carry profoundly dangerous political potentials, as we can see today all around us.

It is hard to avoid the conclusion that many of our world's present problems are a result of our lack of an adequate theory of the religious imagination as *both* a projector of cultural fantasy *and* a medium of conscious light. Without such an understanding, we can only fail, miserably, to compare one another's projections and prisms deeply, fairly, and calmly. Without such an understanding, we will also not be able to understand something like the UFO phenomenon and recognize, as Whitley puts it just right, *that it isn't entirely imaginary*.

Say Again

Whitley observes quite correctly that the human species is a mythmaking species. As anthropologists have long noted, just as birds instinctively build nests and bees build hives, we "make worlds," that is, we create mythical universes to live in. We have no choice. Human beings need meaning, which is to say *story*, in order to live, much as they need food and air. No human community can live without meaning. As Jesus put it, man cannot live by bread alone. He was right about that.

But here is the thing. Every story is incomplete. No story works for everyone. If there is anything I know with certainty as a historian of religions, it is this: If you are worshiping a god, *any* god (including "God"), you are basically "worshipping Zeus." That is to say, your religion, your story, like that of the ancient Greeks and their pantheon, will pass, will be no more, will become a thing of memory, a "mythology" for the curious of some future civilization to study and ponder. It is only a matter of time.

Believe it or not, this is good news, at least in the big picture. Every story must end, after all, because no story can capture the fullness of the human experience and its various historical, environmental, and conceptual challenges. We are always and everywhere more than our stories, more than our cultures and families, more than our races and ethnicities, more than our religions and societies. We shut one book not to end the human venture, but to begin another anew. We abandon our stories not to abandon a story, but to tell yet another, and hopefully another *better* one.

A great part of this book, of course, is about just that: exploring the idea that it is time to tell a better story about the whole pantheon of the unknown, from gods, miracles, angels, and demons to fairy folk, aliens, and the mysterious objects in the sky. We would go further still and suggest that it is possible to consider that "they," and by extension "we," are engaging in the modern eruption of these manifestations and appearances precisely so that a new story *will* be told. We are suggesting that all the bizzarerie is "aimed" at one real object—a mythical object. Which is to say: a new and better story.

So the question is this. After we have said away all of our beliefs and unbeliefs about "what we are, who we are, and where we are," we are still left with a fundamental mystery or question mark: What on earth (or off the Earth) has been in contact with us for all these millennia, producing, in the confusing process, tens of thousands of religions and billions of contact encounters?

Or, if you prefer, *who* wakes up out of all of these trances?

As Whitley describes the scene above, American culture has been building a particular mythology since the late 1940s and early '50s. Since then, popular culture, largely under the radar (and sometimes *on* the radar), has been telling itself a story about contact and communication that began with a fundamental saying away, with an *unidentified* flying object. This early humility, however, quickly trance-formed into an all too certain and all too mechanistic nightmare that was mostly a projection of our own cold war fears and Christian fundamentalist fantasies about the end of the world, which, horror of all horrors, we now had the technology to bring about, and still do.

It was the U.S. Air Force, after all, that coined the expression "UFO" in the early 1950s, largely for defense reasons. In its historical origins, the

acronym is a military cold war expression. It names something that we need *to defend ourselves against*.

We are still defending ourselves against it. Whitley and I want to suggest with this book, which is really a kind of intervention, that we stop doing this; that we just stop defending ourselves against the unknown, the unidentified, the impossible; that we stop denying the phenomena; that we stop ridiculing and shaming people who report these kinds of encounters; but also, of course, that we stop believing the forms in which the encounters appear or are shaped into appearing by the entertainment industry, by the military complex, and by our religions. Isn't this what *Communion* was really all about? To seek a deeper communion and a new form of communication after contact? To jointly materialize, in community, a new and better world?

Flipping Arthur C. Clarke

Both the technological *and* fictional readings of something like the UFO phenomenon are part of the same world-story that Western culture has been telling itself for a century and a half or so. As I have pointed out above, that story can be captured in one word: materialism.

On one level, materialism is just more monotheism in disguise. It is another jealous god. Instead of "My God is the only God," now it is "There is only matter." The story goes like this. Matter is made up of tiny dead things that are bouncing or waving around in predictable mathematical patterns. It's all math. There is no meaning. There is no mind. Evolution is without a goal. It intends nothing. It is going nowhere. The universe is pointless.

This is a bad story in the simple sense that it is deeply depressing. Why anyone wants to live inside such a trance state is simply beyond me. I recognize, of course, that those who embrace it do so because they think it is true. I respect that, but I also know that this conclusion is a belief and not a fact, an interpretation of the world and not the world itself. I also know that there are real phenomena in the world that this interpretation must ignore in order to preserve its own fragile status.

I am always reminded here of the strange and depressing fate of an otherwise wonderful saying by the British science-fiction writer Arthur C. Clarke. It goes like this:

> *Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.*

The saying is the third law of Clarke's famous three laws of prediction. Taken out of context, this third law has been employed endlessly to diminish or demean traditional forms of magical practice and religious experience as deluded, mistaken, and ignorant. Those poor primitives just would not understand our modern science and technology. We moderns are so clever. They were so foolish. This, of course, is precisely the assumption of the reductive comparisons that I criticized at the very beginning of this book. It is also the attitude of colonialists, imperialists, and racists.

I would not deny that there is some truth in this interpretation of Clarke's saying. I am sure that many a nonliterate culture would perceive, say, a smart phone as a magical instrument. But there are numerous problems with this reading of Clarke, beginning with the simple fact that Clarke himself was fascinated with paranormal phenomena from maledictions, stigmata, and apparitions (all which he considered "highly probable") to poltergeists, telepathy, and dowsing (which he considered "possible" and "worth investigating") to survival of bodily death and reincarnation (which he considered "almost certainly untrue").[101] The science-fiction legend even worked with two television professionals to create a series for British television on unexplained phenomena.

Hence his first two laws of prediction, which almost no one ever quotes because they do not serve the typical strategies of denial:

> *When a distinguished but elderly scientist states that something is possible, he is almost certainly right. When he states that something is impossible, he is very probably wrong.*

The only way of discovering the limits of the possible is to venture a little way past them into the impossible.[102]

Clarke was particularly fond of "flipping" our most basic assumptions. In his epilogue to *Arthur C. Clarke's World of Strange Powers*, for example, he seriously suggested that the human eye, under rare but real conditions, might actually reverse its normal functions. Instead of passively *receiving* impressions from the environment, it might actively *project*, like a slide projector, mental apparitions into the physical environment that others can see.[103] Here was his version of the imaginal. He was very serious about this. He was quite convinced that apparitions are real phenomena. Apparitions rated very high on his scale of the probable.

In this same generous and flipping spirit of Clarke, allow me to flip in turn his most famous saying.[104] It would now read something like this:

Any sufficiently profound magical event is indistinguishable from technology.

This is exactly what I see happening today with the various misreadings of the UFO phenomenon. It is, of course, quite common these days to assert, supposedly with Arthur C. Clarke, that the gods can only be ancient astronauts misperceived by scientifically naive ancients. What looks like magic in the historical record is really technology.

But this, I would suggest, is the exact *opposite* of the truth. Contemporary extraterrestrials show every appearance of being gods misperceived by spiritually naive moderns. What looks like technology today is really magic. The gods were not ancient aliens. The aliens are modern gods.

This modern magic and these modern gods, of course, are likely not what they appear to be either. There is the flip of the flip. There is the spiral up.

What Ken Arnold Really Saw

As a concrete way of understanding how such a "flip" of the typical science-fiction scenario might work, let us return one last time to the story of Kenneth Arnold, the businessman from Boise, Idaho, who, as Whitley also mentioned, in many ways initiated "the coming of the saucers," which was the title of a book he co-wrote with the pulp-fiction editor Ray Palmer in 1952.

In the standard accounts, Mr. Arnold began the era of the flying saucer with his sighting of nine silver boomerang shaped objects whizzing over the Cascade Mountains near Yakima, Washington, on June 24, 1947. The journalist Bill Bequette coined the phrase "flying saucer" listening to Mr. Arnold describe what he witnessed later that same day, the phrase went over the wires, Roswell reported a "crashed flying disc" a few weeks later, and the rest is history, as we say.

Well, sort of. As is almost always the case, the real history is more interesting, and stranger, than the remembered history. Once again, the tool of historical contextualization is invaluable here.

It is certainly true that Mr. Arnold seriously entertained, and even probably accepted, some fairly standard technological interpretations of the flying saucer at different points in his life. It is difficult to read what he wrote early in his career and not come away with that impression. But there was always something else behind the mechanistic readings, something that haunted Arnold for his entire life. In a recent interview with his daughter Kim Arnold, Ms. Arnold explained that one of the "hidden secrets" of her father's literary remains and personal files is that he witnessed the flying objects "pulsating with a blue-white light," like a heartbeat, and that he eventually concluded that the saucers were "not mechanical in any sense at all," that is, that they were alive. Mr. Arnold was also convinced that they could change their density, and that they came from another dimensional world, which is the same one we enter when we die. Already in 1949, Arnold had offered a more biological version of the same understanding, when he suggested that these flying objects were in fact "groups and masses of living organisms that are as much a part of our atmosphere and space as the life we find in the oceans."[105] This is pure Charles Fort, by the way. Was he reading Fort?

Kim Arnold also speaks about the telepathic gifts and reincarnation beliefs of her mother and what looks very much like a general Theosophical or occult framework in which her father and mother understood these historical sightings and their cultural aftermath. She speaks at length about how the events stressed and strained the family, mostly because of the way her father's experiences were (like Whitley's) mangled by the media, by Hollywood, and by the debunkers, but also because of the endless phone calls and some ten thousand letters that her father received (remember Whitley and Anne's letters?). Finally, she also describes how her father was threatened by a government agent not to speak about what he saw and recounts in some detail how both of her parents spent the rest of their lives in fear of being killed by the U.S. government, whose intelligence community appears to have manipulated and harassed Arnold for its own purposes.[106]

We can now well see that the Ken Arnold story is a perfect example of "Arthur C. Clarke flipped." Modern technology was not being misperceived by scientifically naive ancients. Ancient souls were being misperceived by spiritually naive moderns.

And the confusions only multiplied, fast. This occult vision of soul creatures living in the atmosphere or energy beings emerging from some other dimension almost immediately got implicated in a whole series of cold war fears, secret military projects, Christian teachings about "demons" (such interpretive strategies have been used for two millennia to deny and demonize other people's experiences of the sacred, which, like the Christian God, often do possess both positive and negative dimensions, at least relative to the ego), sci-fi stories, and Hollywood movies, not to mention more than a few government intelligence responses no doubt designed to protect and hide real military technology. Hence what we have called "the wastebasket problem." Where to start? Where to begin anew?

Emergent Mythologies

As I explained in chapter 1 and demonstrated again here with my flip of Arthur C. Clarke's famous saying, I think we have to begin anew by

actively resisting any exclusive reliance on the machine readings and moving away from the materialist imagination to really understand what is happening to us, and has long been happening to us. The older religious stories may be better in some ways in that they recognize the spiritual side of all of this, hence the flip. But they are far worse in others. Again, neither the scientism nor the dogmatic religion are going to get us there. We need to keep shooting the arrow both ways. We need to keep flipping the coin, back and forth, back and forth. We need to spiral up. We need a new third way forward. Which is another way of saying: We don't just need another story; we also need another *kind* of story, that is, another way of telling stories.

What will these new stories and this new way of telling them look like? I do not know, but I have two basic guesses.

The first guess is that these new stories will take modern cosmology, quantum physics, and evolutionary biology as their main sources of inspiration or general framework and put an extremely robust and expansive sense of "cosmic conscious evolution" at the center of their narratives—cosmological, material, and biological, yes, but also cultural and spiritual. Here we are not just "star dust," as Carl Sagan had it. We are highly evolved expressions of star*light* become conscious and aware within a vast web of planetary life. These new stories will not just be evolutionary, then. They will also be "green," that is, deeply ecological in hope and direction. In *Mutants and Mystics*, I called this deep, science-inspired, nature-based structure of the emergent mythologies the "Super Story." That still seems exactly right to me.

No wonder, then, Whitley found himself buying a copy of *X-Men* #1 twenty years ago. That particular cultural mythology reflects and refracts his own mythology, which is no myth. It is worth noting, though, that the X-Men are very late to the emerging mutant mysticism. Such practices, experiences, and belief systems are not 50 years old. They are 150 years old. They go all the way back to the origins of evolutionary biology itself in the co-founding figure of Alfred Russel Wallace (1823–1913) and his deep personal engagement with nineteenth-century Spiritualism, occultism, and psychical research, all of which was forming around the Darwinian revolution.[107]

The second guess is that the new super story–tellers will be different *kinds* of storytellers to the extent that, as authors and artists with real empirical experience, they will always keep in mind the indubitable fact that they are telling stories, even as—and here is the tricky part—they will also know that their fictions encode the remembered experiences of contact. In Whitley's language, they will be mythmakers who know that their myths are not just imaginary.

I consider Whitley Strieber to be just such a super story–teller. I do not, of course, think that Whitley has everything right. How could he? How could anyone? That's not the point. But I take his deepest instincts and intuitions as pointing us in the right direction: toward a conscious cosmic evolution, a subtly material or electromagnetic soul and a future environmentally sustainable civilization—all embedded in an already super natural world.

I also take his conviction that the imagination can materialize its contents in the physical environment (something he shares with the late Arthur C. Clarke) and his fascinating extension of von Neumann's Quantum Perception problem—that we might actually "open a door" into an invisible world or dimension through the psychic power of belief—to be profound and dramatic instances of the imaginal and hermeneutical practices I described in chapter 9. The latter practices I would summarize again as the bizarre fact that we are always everywhere imagining, interpreting, and believing ourselves into existence through the process of contact, communication, communion, and community. We would do well to recognize that and to make it more conscious.

What we have here in the end is, as Whitley put it elsewhere, "the bone-structure of another new religion." But must we go there? Must we do this yet again? "Hasn't the past taught us anything at all?"[108] Could it not be finally the time not just for a different story, but also for a different kind of story, a story that knows itself *as story*?

The fundamental question remains: just who is telling *all* of these stories? Who is left after another story is told, the book is shut, and the spell is broken?

And so we come to our final tool or technique. After *comparison*, *phenomenology*, *history*, *hermeneutics*, *erotics*, *saying away*, *the traumatic*

secret, and *energetics*, we finally come to this: *say again*. With these two words, I mean two things. I mean: "Say again," as in "Tell us another story." But I also mean: "Say again?" as in "Do you really believe all of that?" I mean a particular way of inhabiting our communities, cultures, and religions, a way that is humbler, more paradoxical, more frankly honest about the fragile and fictional nature of *all* of our cultural productions, including and especially us. I mean what Whitley has long called "sitting with the question" and not settling for a particular pat answer. I mean what the two of us have modeled, however imperfectly, for you in this very book.

Mythology and Ideology

Before I close, I want to return to "the wastebasket" with which I began and struggle with an aspect of myth making that is neither bright nor hopeful. Recall that I began expressing my own voice in chapter 1 with a turning away from the military components of the UFO for a focusing in on the personal visionary and spiritual dimensions. I trust that perspective is clear enough by now, and that you can see well what it gives us, and what it does not give us.

What it does not give us is an adequate struggle with the political and ideological dimensions of the problem at hand. Nor does it adequately treat the very real military involvement in these histories, which also needs to be studied carefully and calmly. Mark Pilkington, Robbie Graham, and Diana Walsh Pasulka are all doing wonderful work here, for example, with the disinformation campaigns that the intelligence community has engaged in over the decades, or the U.S. Department of Defense's involvement in the script writing for UFO films in Hollywood.[109]

I want to address some of these difficult issues, ever so briefly, here at the end. I want to metaphorically wrestle for a moment with the people in Whitley's room who broke into his cabin and put something strange in his ear. I want to acknowledge the decades-long anxieties of Mr. and Mrs. Arnold after those cruel threats in the desert. I want to recognize the role of shadowy intelligence officers, literal abductions, and misinformation campaigns that damage people's careers, even ruin their lives. I want to call

out the morally reprehensible ways that individuals and traditions literally demonize the religious experiences of other people that cannot fit into their own narrow and close-minded belief systems (calling something "demonic," after all, is also a conspiracy theory). I want to acknowledge the moral and intellectual integrity of my colleagues in the study of myth and religion who have consistently pointed out to us that every myth is a power play, that every religion is political, and that countless human beings have suffered, and suffered horribly, from these mythical and ritualized ideologies.[110] I want to point out that Whitley's writings are filled with ideas and plots that express the same fears, the same concerns, and the same sufferings.

I am often asked about the wilder conspiracy theories (underground alien bases, the U.S. government forming alliances with extraterrestrials, alien crop circles, that sort of thing). I always respond: "I don't do conspiracy." What I mean by this is that I don't trust the wild conspiracies that are constantly spun out of this material, which is not to say that I do not recognize that there are likely real truths embedded in some of them. As literal scenarios, however, I always find them stretched and finally unbelievable. Having said that, I want to back up a bit here and qualify this stance in the light of some remarkable work on conspiracy in the sociology of religion.[111]

I still do not "do conspiracy," that is, I don't generally buy the *content* of the extreme conspiracies, but I do understand their social *function*. What I mean by this is that I understand how conspiracy theories make an otherwise chaotic world meaningful to a small group of people whose psychology is dominated by the attractive belief that they possess a fantastic truth hidden from the rest of us. I also recognize a general if distorted truth behind the contents of the different conspiracies, namely, that mythologies are also always ideologies, and that "telling a story" is never enough, particularly when there are institutions and political and economic interests involved that want to "control the story" or "take back the story." And, of course, there always are.

On a deeper level still, it must be said that all conspiracy theories—both reasonable and unreasonable—express a most basic fact about the human condition that is well known in the humanities, indeed, that grounds

all of them: namely, that all of us at every moment *are* being duped, *are* being tricked by our languages, our cultures, our religions, and, alas, by our very brains. Every culture is a trance state. Every ego is a cultural production. Every text is a historical construction. Every perception is akin to a dream. Is not this proposed truth the ultimate conspiracy theory? Am I a conspiracy theorist?

In the end, the most reliable truth of conspiracy is not a positive one but a negative one. What you see is not what you get. Seeing is not believing. Don't believe what you believe. Don't think what you think. *Say away*. I have put this most basic of all truths in the humanities in my own work in terms of the observation that all of us are "being written" by language and culture. One could just as easily put the same insight, though, in the terms of Philip K. Dick, who once wrote that "we are not the artists but the drawings." Here we are also "being drawn."

Both are true enough. We are characters written and drawn in a two-dimensional graphic novel, real superheroes struggling to step off the page and into the conviction of our own independent existence, which, alas, is not as yet at all clear.

18

Shifting the Conversation

WHITLEY

Our thesis throughout this book has been that it is not necessary to believe in such things as flying saucers, aliens, ghosts, and other unexplained phenomena in order to study them. Such study, as Jeff has pointed out, has been developing in the universities for nearly two centuries. But the same has not happened in science. The difficulty that has kept science from advancing understanding of them in the same way that it has advanced understanding of, say, meteors, radio waves, or quantum entanglement is that such study, in the community's present social culture, raises an implication that one also believes in them not only as things perceived, but as things that are.

As Jeff urges, make the cut.

Given the bizarre nature of the evidence, it would seem important that there be enough analysis of it to at least establish some basic parameters of understanding before events compel scientific attention. If disclosure or some other event created a compelling suggestion, say, that aliens are here, it would be a grave mistake and a great tragedy to attempt to understand them in the context of the popular vision of them. It is not adequate, and there is every implication that, behind the supposed alien presence, there

lies a completely new vision of reality that is at once larger and more accurate than the current rigorously materialistic scientific vision.

We are suggesting that it is possible to acknowledge the super part of the natural world and study it in terms of the perceptions it creates, without assuming that by doing so we think that the phenomena generating those perceptions are the same as the noumena that lie behind them. Even if the reality of aliens is announced to the world by credible authorities, a new way of addressing the matter is still essential to any successful understanding. Right now, "contact" would be taken as the beginning of interaction with another society something like our own. From all the evidence, this approach would be a failure. It wouldn't even come close to the achievement of true communion, which is a matter of at once seeing the true picture in all its complexity, and ourselves in our own ambiguity. To make real contact work we must not forget what is actually the central reality of the whole matter: not only that we don't know who and what they are, but that we also don't know who and what we are.

Find them, find ourselves.

From my own life experience and the vast mountain of similar testimony that Anne brought to light, it seems clear that they are *something*, but just what remains unclear. Aliens, sure, it's not impossible. It also cannot be the whole story, not if all this testimony is even partly accurate.

Right now—and this is after thirty years of active involvement and research—I would not be willing to advocate for any particular explanation. If pressed, I would say that the most likely "correct" answer will only come when we have a more precise understanding of reality than we do now. Most importantly, a more precise understanding of what part of reality mind actually occupies.

Inevitably, as research brings better understanding of the overall phenomenon, fundamentally new knowledge is bound to come, possibly about the nature of reality, and certainly about the human mind, its actual relationship to the physical, and how and why it generates its folklores and injects them into its cultures. And about just in what way this other presence is real.

As I pointed out in my mythmaking chapter, I have played a major role in the development of alien folklore. But why is it that descriptions of perceptions such as those I reported in *Communion* would be almost

universally taken to be claims of actual experience, even when the author prefaced them as I did?

The reason is that something is actually being seen and interacted with. It isn't all in the mind, and the evidence is strong that the mind isn't all in us, either. If it was, the Physical Traces chapter could never have been written. There are physical traces, so there are physical events. But are they physical in the same sense that an encounter with, say, a doctor's needle is physical? This we do not yet know.

Folklore arises when super nature, in all its majesty and mystery, acts on minds that cannot hope to see the noumenon, and do not have enough information to understand that the phenomenon may not be the actuality.

Winston Churchill asked back in 1952, in a memo sent to Sir Henry Tizard and his Working Party on UFOs that had been formed in response to the large number of flying saucer sightings then taking place, "what can it mean?" Given that, more than sixty years later, we are still no closer to an answer than we were in 1952, it was a good question. If we don't finally address it effectively, the phenomenon will continue taking on a life of its own, penetrating more and more deeply into the culture, with consequences that cannot even be guessed at.

Whatever its origin, the phenomenon is a bridge into the unknown, and like any bridge, can be crossed. Do so, and the unknown begins to become known.

A good place for science to start serious study is to turn to the people who report interacting with aliens. There are certainly enough of us to provide a rich ground for effective sampling. Is a history of abuse consistent across a broader sample than has so far been studied? Are our brains functioning normally, and if not, then how does their functionality differ from the norm? Having lived with "the visitors" essentially all of my life, I would very, very much like to know this. We see—or perhaps a better word is "notice"—things that "normal" people do not see, but when we dare to report our experiences, we face prejudice, and it can be extreme. And, in fact, this sort of rejection goes way, way back in history. Prophets and visionaries are almost universally despised. But why? What is the cultural need for this? It would be useful to find out.

Neither does an autistic person see the world in a normal way, nor somebody with Down syndrome or an individual with Asperger's. In recent

years, the work of people like Timothy Shriver has brought more general social acknowledgment that these different sorts of minds have value in and of themselves, and that people whose brains function in these nonmainstream ways are worth integrating into the culture, and that their intellectual and creative output should be valued for itself, and not seen as an artifact of disease.

I want that same level of acceptance for myself and the whole community of close encounter witnesses. I've created a body of work that could be useful, in that it chronicles a struggle to understand that will be mirrored many times over if the experience of interaction with the visitors ever extends into public life. Unfortunately, it is largely ignored or misperceived by the cultural mainstream. It is ignored because it entertains rejected knowledge. But why has that knowledge been rejected, and along with it the people who possess it?

I don't think that there is any single answer, but there are some specific ones that can be usefully addressed.

An example of what is wrong occurred in January of 2015, when the CIA announced that its most popular recent tweet had been one which pointed to a suggestion that all of the flying saucer reports of the 1950s were attributable to misperceptions of U-2 flights.

This story had been floated by the agency previously, but cannot even come close to explaining the enormous worldwide phenomenon that was unfolding then, not even the part of it that was taking place in the United States. This is for a simple reason: during the day a U-2 flying at fifty thousand feet is invisible from the ground, and many of the sightings took place in daylight. For that matter, seeing one at night would be highly unlikely. The story is, to be blunt, blatantly false.

Nevertheless, National Public Radio repeated it uncritically a few days later:

"Good morning. I'm Steve Inskeep with an explanation for UFO sightings in the 1950s. The CIA released a document this year which it calls its most-read document of 2014. It reports on flights by U-2 spy planes. The document says those secret planes flying higher than anyone thought possible were mistaken for alien spaceships. Normally, a conspiracy theory would say the CIA is behind some mysterious activity. In this case, the CIA really was. It's Morning Edition."

The media's uncritical acceptance of childish palaver like this is part of such a long tradition of similar failures that it bears only passing mention as a tragic inevitability. I will just touch on the concern that there is some sort of coordination between the media and the intelligence community. Perhaps, in the future, such things will become clear.

There are two larger questions here: first, why have the CIA, NASA, the U.S. Air Force, and other governmental organizations spent so much time and effort "debunking" UFO claims that clearly cannot be explained? Are we missing something here, or are they, perhaps, dismissing something they don't understand because it seems somehow provocative and they cannot control it? Or maybe it's as dangerous as it seems to many people, in which case they might consider warning the population, at least . . . unless they have been intimidated into silence.

Given all the research I have done and all of the experience I have had, I would suggest that they probably don't understand what's happening or whether or not it's dangerous, and that is one reason for the secrecy. The "plasmas" of the Condign Report appear in our skies and seem provocative. Strangely, even though they are judged to be natural and of no defense importance, information about them remains classified. The existence of this secrecy is certainly one of the major reasons, if not the primary one, that the alien and UFO folklores have become as developed as they have, and also a major reason why misinformation abounds, and along with it the inept "debunking" that we see in the scientific, intellectual, and media cultures. It is into the context of all this confusion that any official disclosure must be made, and perhaps that's why John Podesta has had trouble getting it to happen. Formal disclosure and the disintegration of the official story are two different things, though, and either one would have the same effect: a hopelessly uninformed media and a confused public would be left to sort it out however they may.

If there is disclosure, at least then the social opprobrium that close encounter witnesses endure would end. But even if there isn't, something needs to be done here. People are suffering, and the humanitarian issue must be addressed. Additionally, the media needs to accept that the matter is a serious one and stop blocking any serious consideration of it with indifference, fallacious reportage, and, above all, the devastating weapon of

laughter which, more than anything, suppresses rational approach to the subject.

As recently as January of 2015, the comedian John Hodgman delivered a Whitley Strieber rectal probe joke on the *Ted Radio Hour*. He framed it in the context of having seen the film adaptation of *Communion*. But prior to discoursing on the movie, such as it was, he was careful to deliver the identifying Whitley Strieber catchphrase, "rectal probes." He concluded his description of having seen the movie in a venue where it never actually played with the line, "Whitley Strieber was played by Christopher Walken. The aliens were played by rubber puppets."

The close encounter witnesses are among the last minority groups that can be humiliated without penalty. I curse my own ineptitude in having come up with that phrase "rectal probe." It has been one of the primary reasons that the whole phenomenon continues to be taken in a simplistic way as a claim of alien encounter, and a laughable one.

Even given all that, I have been one of the lucky ones. I know of close encounter witnesses who have been divorced, fired, ostracized, institutionalized, and, in a few cases, driven to suicide because they made their experiences known. While, as I have recorded in some other venues, I have at times very seriously considered suicide, I have never been abandoned by my family, and have retained many of my friends, for the most part the oldest ones, who understand that I would never engage in fraud, and that the suffering I experienced was not particularly funny. Most of them understand that I am reporting perceptions, and what that means. They also know that I am almost pathologically honest. They are aware of the irony that it was this honesty that led me to write *Communion*, the book which has caused me to be labeled at best a misanthrope of some sort and at worst a liar.

I am not a liar, and I do not deserve to be punished for perpetrating a literary hoax, any more than I or any other close encounter witnesses deserve to be marginalized or discriminated against for reporting what we have seen and experienced. Just like other groups with unusual perceptual experiences and ways of responding to reality, we deserve to be treated with some modicum of respect.

However, changing all this might prove more difficult than it should be, because there is a social institution involved that actively seeks to distort the culture's view of the phenomenon.

I refer again to the official intrusion into the matter. It goes beyond denial. There is a proactive element as well. Just before I published my book *Confirmation*, in which there is some criticism of U. S. Air Force, a fake story was planted about me in *Parade* magazine stating that I had "admitted" that I had temporal lobe epilepsy and made a contribution to the Epilepsy Foundation. This story was the exact opposite of the truth, which I had reported in an earlier book, *Transformation*. On the first page, I explained that tests had shown that my brain was not seizure-prone, and that I did not have TLE. I understood from a *Parade* editor that the story had come from friends of mine in the air force. I had no friends there, obviously.

The UFO/alien aspect of the larger phenomenon appears to have been singled out for special treatment by governmental entities, for reasons that remain concealed behind the barrier of classification.

In general, UFO researchers advocate that governments around the world are universally devoted to concealing an alien presence on Earth. Personally, I am not so ready to believe this. Certain governments are concealing *something*, but it is difficult to believe that all governments that might have been exposed to a phenomenon that has been lavishly present worldwide for at least sixty years would continue to keep such a secret.

I would assume that the United States and the United Kingdom are keeping secret not only that they know that there is something appearing in our atmosphere that they cannot explain, but also that they know that it sometimes has an effect on some of their citizens, and they don't want to admit that they can't control it. No matter its origin, alien or earthly, natural or generated by some sort of intelligence, it affects vast numbers of people and, for that reason alone, should be addressed rationally in the public forum. Because this does not happen, an enormous amount of human experience and human suffering that probably has nothing to do with national security has been left unstudied, and the victims made figures of fun instead of given the support that our normally compassionate society ought to be offering them.

It is, quite simply, no longer possible for official circles to deny that somebody or something unknown is manifesting itself in our world. John

Podesta is right: the time for denial has passed. The revelation of yet another massive, ongoing lie will not surprise the public any more than revelation of the truth of this strange presence will. Further denial, though, will continue to put a damper on granting for any research that might touch on the subject, and thus cause the present confusion to continue to expand into ever more elaborate folklores.

Another reason for classification is probably that governments cannot determine whether or not the phenomenon is a military threat.

Given, however, that these things have been engaging in their theatrics since at least the late forties, and probably for much, much longer than that, it is ludicrous to think that any threat from them would be military in nature. If threat exists, and my own experience and that of many other people certainly suggests that it might, it is deeply personal and individual.

Governments need to acknowledge that whatever they know and have encountered is part of a very large-scale and ancient phenomenon and detach it completely from national security classification. The National Academy of Sciences needs to encourage granting in the field, with a specific concentration on the close encounter witnesses, who are not only in the front line of whatever is happening, but also the core source of the myth that is building up around it.

Science and the wider culture, at the very least, need to approach it objectively on two levels: the first is for science to accept what governments has already confirmed, which is that the “plasmas” exist and to acknowledge that they have effects on people; the second is to acknowledge the contribution offered by the academic community: this is an ancient part of human life, and it is being studied, as Jeff has shown, within the academy. There is no reason that science should not follow suit.

Early on, based on my memories of what had happened to me and the testimony of others, I found the alien hypothesis very convincing. It was not until Anne began to report that my strange experience of seeing a dead friend in the company of the aliens was actually a commonplace of the letters we were receiving did I begin to think that this might not be an entirely satisfactory solution to the puzzle.

Now I think that there is an entirely new way to look at the phenomenon. First, it should be seen in context as a cultural artifact that is being forged as Jeff points out, in very deep levels of our psyche, places

that have the power to transform how we view ourselves and the world around us in fundamental ways.

Second, it should be seen as having a physical component. It's been admitted that plasmas that are not understood by science are involved, so it's not that they don't exist or that they aren't worth studying. Hardly: the Condign Report also admits that these plasmas affect the temporal lobe of the human brain, the very seat of our humanity and intelligence. What's more, there are unexplained objects appearing in people's bodies, often, as in my case, near the brain. Clearly, study is essential.

Study of the witnesses certainly is possible, but how to go about studying such a transient phenomenon as a plasma, or UFO, that flits across the sky leaving behind, at best, fuzzy traces on amateur video? Actually, that wouldn't be difficult, either. We study transient phenomena like lightning, superwaves, and stellar explosions. All that is required is preparation. It would be possible to use camera arrays that scan wide areas of the sky across the spectrum of light, and gather data about all anomalies that are recorded. That they would be recorded is beyond question. UFO skywatchers using infrared lenses record them all the time.

Do they appear cyclically? How fast do they travel? Do they pop up in the atmosphere like sprites, or do they enter it from above? Do they land? If so, where and for how long, and what do people in their proximity report experiencing?

Assuming that the cultural barriers are dropped and scientists and intellectuals without negative preconceptions can be found to do the work, progress can be made.

Right now, as we have demonstrated, the culture, insofar as it cares about this issue at all, is divided into the two camps, one that believes in the alien hypothesis and the other that thinks that it's good only for a laugh. But, as we have also argued and the evidence suggests, there may be much more to it than that.

It seems likely that we are not yet finished understanding the way reality works and how the universe is actually structured. At present, for example, there are a number of experiments going on and theories being proposed that, if they prove out, will fundamentally revise our understanding not only of the universe, but of reality, yet again. As this is being written, for example, an attempt is being made at the Large Hadron

Collider in Switzerland to detect mini black holes. If they are found to exist, then a key tenet of string theory, that parallel universes exist, will receive fundamental support.

Another experiment being prepared at the Fermi National Accelerator Laboratory, Fermilab, could change our vision of reality in yet another crucially important way. This experiment involves an instrument called the holometer, which, when completed, will be the world's most sensitive laser interferometer. Using it, scientists may be able to answer a fundamental question about reality, which is whether it is a three-dimensional object or a two-dimensional surface projecting a hologram—that is to say, whether it is obedient to classical physics or resolved into the forms we see and experience by some as yet unknown process.

Unknown, that is, to us. If it is indeterminate, then there may be ways of manipulating how it resolves into classical form. If so, advanced alien species might have powers that are literally beyond magic, powers, for example, to raise the dead by altering the flow of time or even editing reality itself as easily as we edit film.

They could be so advanced and so large scale in their capabilities that we are part of their reality in the same sense that chimpanzees are of ours. A chimp can apprehend a thing like a car but nothing can ever enable it to understand even the slightest thing about what it really is or why it moves. Nor can we ever explain to the chimp in his cage or his little corner of African jungle where he is. We can't tell him, no matter how hard we try. He literally cannot know.

We don't know, but I'm not so sure that we can't. Whoever our visitors are, the fact that, as I have found, there appears to be a process of education suggests that we might have a capacity for understanding. Otherwise, why bother?

So, if we can learn, then we need to do our part. Instead of hiding from the truth behind a screen of official secrecy and ignoring it intellectually and scientifically, we need to face it full on. I am not the only person who could engage with the visitors in the way that I have. If I can, then in one way or another, and each by his own lights and to his own abilities, we all can.

What will we find, though, if the evidence points away from an incursion by beings from another planet?

A remarkable paper was published in *Physical Review X* (http://journals.aps.org/prx/abstract/10.1103/PhysRevX.4.041013) by Michael J.W. Hall, Dirk-André Deckert, and Howard M. Wiseman on October 23, 2014. In it, they propose that quantum weirdness may not actually exist at all, and that its effects can be explained classically if there are a large number of other universes occupying space coexistent with our own. "Here, a 'world' means an entire universe with well-defined properties, determined by the classical configuration of its particles and fields," they say in their abstract.

What makes this paper so provocative is that it does away with the "spookiness" of things like quantum indeterminacy and entanglement, replacing them with very slight interactions with corresponding particles in the other universes. Dr. Wiseman told the *New Scientist* that "one way to think about it is that they coexist in the same space as our universe, like ghost universes."

They would not interact with our universe except in very small ways, but this interaction, Dr. Wiseman and his colleagues believe, would be enough to explain why things like the "double-slit experiment" work. In that experiment, of course, photons fired at a light-sensitive screen through a double slit create a characteristic pattern on it that suggests that they are acting as both particle and wave.

If, however, we are not seeing some sort of weirdness at all, but the effect of subtle interaction with other universes, themselves operating according to the classical model, then quantum weirdness may be an illusion. It may also be that intelligent creatures arising in these universes have developed exquisite technologies that enable them to interact with universes other than their own. Thus when I sat across from a dead man in my woods, he was interacting with me from a context in which he wasn't dead at all. This would explain, as well, why the dead who accompany the aliens generally report that they're perfectly well. Because they are—but in another universe.

It could be, then, that there is an understandable "classical" explanation for all the weirdness that we are observing around us. It is due to the fact that, either naturally or by the application of some sort of technology, or both, there is interaction between our universe and others, and the "aliens" indeed do not come from some vastly distant planet, but from right here. How ironic it would be, if this is true, that we have spent so

much time trying to imagine how it might be possible to travel interstellar distances in order to somehow explain this presence, when its actual distance from us might not be unimaginably far away at all, but unimaginably close.

In any case, experiments can be devised to determine whether or not this theory is true. From my own experience of life, I would think that it may indeed be so, and that the brain, in some cases, might be capable of obtaining information from these other universes, and the body of interacting with them. Perhaps it takes something unusual in a person's life or in their genetic makeup or both for them to be sensitive in this way. As I pointed out in "Cracking the Cosmic Egg," and Jeff discussed in "Trauma, Trance, and Transcendence," early childhood trauma may shatter our expectations of reality, leaving us to see, amid the fragments that are left to us, shadows from ghost universes.

There may be even more to it than that, though. We might not understand our relationship to the physical universe any more than we do the true nature of the reality in which we find ourselves living. I say this because so many of our early cultures have included either a human origin among the stars or a means of returning to them in their mythologies, or both.

For example, the "solar boats" of Khufu, discovered in granite pits near the Great Pyramid may have been intended to convey the pharaoh's soul heavenward—that is to say, into the sky, presumably when the Milky Way aligned with the Nile. Similarly, in south Texas the "White Shaman," discovered by my old friend Jim Zintgraff on his ranch near the Pecos River fifty years ago, suggests a similar belief. The White Shaman is one of the finest examples of rock art in the Americas, and depicts a shaman directing souls skyward, apparently toward the Milky Way. So this idea that the soul might ascend to the sky would seem to be both very widespread and very old, as both the solar boats and the White Shaman are around four thousand years old.

Carolyn Boyd, in her book *Rock Art of the Lower Pecos,* describes and interprets not only the White Shaman, but places it in context with all of the rock art of the region.

I have gone down along the Pecos River at night, just a short distance from the White Shaman, and seen the Milky Way reflected in its clear, cliff-

bound waters, and imagined, as Anthony Powell so beautifully expresses in *Temporary Kings*, book eleven in his A Dance to the Music of Time series, "the liberated soul ascends, looking at the sunset towards the west wind, and hearing secret harmonies."

As I looked up into the stars in that ancient place, I wondered about those harmonies. I recalled an evening with astronaut Edgar Mitchell at the home of some mutual friends, when he described to me and Anne what it was like to look at Earth from the moon. It was a story he must have told even more often than I have told the story of the *Communion* moment, but hearing the wonder in his voice was transcending, humbling, and transformative. Singing behind his words, most certainly were those secret harmonies. We all hear them, when our minds are quiet and the night sky overspreads. It is fundamental to the human condition, this wonder. Do we have a history of some sort in the stars, or a fate among them? Are we travelers in the sky above, as well as among the ghost universes of which our own, to the others, must be equally a shadow?

Will we one day discover that our mind is a bridge to a living mosaic of universes, both ghostly and physical, and that ghosts, aliens, demons, angels, and all the super and yet natural creatures that we are able to peripherally observe and interact with, appear among us from various sources, some of them in the physical world, and others in a mysterious vastness that resides right here, right now, an infinity of mirrors reflecting reality as an endless strangeness?

As travelers among the forked paths of the forest of reality, we come once again to the place of question: who are we, what are we, where are we?

I have on the wall of my office a framed copy of the famous photograph of Earth known as the *Pale Blue Dot.* The photograph was taken in 1990 by the Voyager 1 spacecraft from a distance of 3.7 billion miles in space. In it, the dot where we have appeared and raised our eyes to the stars floats in a cathedral vastness, tiny, alone and profoundly isolated.

So it is easy enough to see where we are. We are riding a speck of dust in a great nowhere, a universe that may certainly contain other pale blue dots, but is, for the most part, a trackless desert of wandering stars and riotously uninhabitable planets.

But who, then, and what? We are a species of ape, reflecting in our brutality toward one another the same sort of brutality that we observe in the chimpanzee tribe, that and so very much more. We are very cruel and also very inventive, with the result that, across history, we have brought many an evil imagining to malignant life. But we also cradle our babies and touch one another with gentle love in the night, and weep at passings and rejoice at births, and live our lives out along a river that, deep within each of us, reflects the stars.

We hunger to believe. We need to believe. Unfortunately, we are all too often also willing to harm those who do not believe as we do, even to kill them. I remember once when I was walking late at night in the woods behind my old cabin, I perceived something nearby that I could not name nor even see, but which frightened me so deeply that I became unable to move forward or back. I was a good mile from the nearest inhabited place, and this presence was dropping down around me like the folds of a malign, living darkness.

I finally fell to my knees and crouched down into myself and began to pray to a god whose existence I doubt but whose help I needed, and begged for protection. Whereupon somebody out in the dark said across the silence, "Look at him, calling on his gods." In another context, once again when I was praying, I heard, "There's nobody here but us."

Us. I did not feel a "them" in that word at all. I felt in it a sense of deep comradeship, as if "us" was almost unimaginably inclusive, a vast word that was being used to describe a vast being of which we are all a part. "Us" was them, was me, was you, was all the unseen lives on all the pale blue dots that dust the wasteland, and was consciousness in the void.

So we are here in the great unknown, "us," the consciousness that rides the desert of space and time, a ghost light, extremely rare but nevertheless real and signaling our presence as best we are able and however we are able, signaling in the dark.

But what, then, are we? We know that we are flesh, and seek to believe that we are more, that our consciousness, which seems so ephemeral, might in some way continue on, affirming not only our individual selves, but also the billions of years that it has taken the pale blue dot to evolve creatures with questions in their minds and wonder in their eyes.

We so want this precious “us” to be more than sparks in flesh doomed to die with the inevitable implosion of the body. I have had a lifetime of experience that suggests that we may be more—indeed, that we have hardly even begun to touch on the complexity and enormity of what it is to be human. But I cannot give you that lifetime. I cannot give the richness of my experiences to others, only describe them as best I can. I can never transmit them as I have lived them, not in their visceral reality. I can never share with you the scent of a man who materialized before my eyes, from, he said, a place that is between physical lives. I cannot share what it feels like to have an implant, or to remeber the strange loves I have known.

The fact that we are so isolated within ourselves is our tragedy and also our blessing. For that which drives so many of us to desperate belief also energizes the question, which is our most valuable asset and our best hope.

What are we? A fleeting, intricate presence riding a tiny speck of water and rock, out here in the dark, sailing the ship of wonder ever more deeply into the void from which we came, that is our true home and mysterious destination.

We are alone. We are not.

APPENDIX

“An Approximation to Realness or Final Awakening”

Or How to Make the Supernatural Super Natural in Nine Steps

JEFF

The odd title of this appendix comes from Charles Fort’s *The Book of the Damned* (1919). With respect to the unexplained, Fort understood that it all comes down to one’s comparative practice. Collection, classification, and pattern recognition are the keys to seeing what is already there before our eyes, if only we could collect enough pieces and put them together in the right way. In his boldest moments, Fort even claimed that a sufficiently robust comparative practice could result in “an approximation to realness or final awakening.” Such a comparative practice would, in effect, end the world we assume and reveal another one, our true condition. He called this apocalyptic possibility on the horizon of thought “the gossip of angels.”

Whitley and I have done our best in these pages to imagine this angelic gossip. We have seen things. We have said things. We have failed, of course, to arrive at any “realness or final awakening.” But we never promised as much. But we did our best. It is now up to you.

Toward that same gossip of angels, here is a summary of what we have seen and said, a kind of instruction sheet for anyone who seeks to make the supernatural super natural in his or her own life and community.

COMPARE. Data is just data. It means nothing until it is classified and compared toward some end. *Everything* depends on what you "put on the table," that is, on your comparative practice: what you compare with what to conclude. Begin, then, by recognizing your choices and your own role in this selective process. Compare the appearances you are trying to understand with other similar but different appearances in the historical record, all the while being careful to "shoot the arrow both ways," that is, be careful not to privilege too quickly any past *or* present interpretation of these similarities.

MAKE A CUT. Make a distinction between what has appeared and what is and recognize that, as an embodied ego, you have no reliable access to the latter, and for one simple reason: you yourself are a biological medium or neurological filter. Do not believe what you believe.

HISTORICALLY CONTEXTUALIZE. Place the events that you are trying to understand both in the general history of religions and in their own more immediate historical, social, and political contexts. Employ these contexts to not only recognize the uniqueness of the events but also to see how they fit into much larger global patterns.

INTERPRET AND DOUBLY IMAGINE. Consider the possibility that some of these encounters may be mediated expressions of another form of mind (maybe ours) making contact with the human ego and transmitting some symbolic signal. Recognize that, generally speaking, extraordinary visions and experiences are not what they seem on the surface, that they must be interpreted. Recognize the roles of fantasy and projection in the production of these potential signals, but do not assume that everything imagined is imaginary. Imagine double. Hone your Hermes practice, your hermeneutics.

PRACTICE AN EROTICS. Consider the ways that these extraordinary experiences are shaped by particular gender assumptions and sexual orientations. Also look for moments in which they might actively engage or "flip" the human sexual system and so lead to

various forms of union or communion. Do not automatically reduce these experiences to the simply sexual, but recognize how sexual energies can sometimes morph into transcendent spiritual states.

SAY AWAY. Learn to live with paradox, to sit with the question. Come to terms with the bluntly physical ways that these events sometimes materialize in the environment. Recognize the manner in which they commonly fuse or transcend the subjective and objective dimensions of the human experience through various paradoxical "paranormal" phenomena and so point to some deeper, super natural world before the "splitting off" of the mental and material dimensions of ordinary experience. Recognize that this splitting into a subject "in here" perceiving objects "out there" is a function of the human organism and its cognitive and sensory hardware and probably not of the psychophysical world itself.

LISTEN FOR THE TRAUMATIC SECRET. Keep in mind the possible role of trance in the generation of the stories you are trying to understand. Consider whether the trance state might be related to a history of trauma that has "cracked open" the ego for contact and communication, but do not assume an identity between the traumatic opening and the transcendence that might be rushing in through this cracked-open door.

THINK IN TERMS OF AN ENERGETICS. Look for energetic, electromagnetic, or plasmalike phenomena within and around the extreme experience. See if these altered states of energy appear to be alive or intelligent in some way. Recognize that you may well not be able to reason with them, but that you may be able to resonate with them. And finally . . .

SAY AGAIN. Decide for yourself whether the story that your cultural trance-forms have put you in is a story you really want to be in. If it is not, then wake up out of that story, step off the page, and begin to think about telling another, but try to tell this new story in a new way—as a true fiction. You will need help. Seek

out like-minded individuals. Create community. Look to unexplained events—weird "coincidences," striking dreams, drop-your-jar super moments—in your life as possible clues to how to tell this new story-self with others, or how to *not* tell it (there might, after all, be negative or dark synchronicities). Finally, consider just who is telling *all* of these stories. Here are the steps, then: contact, communication, communion, community, and, finally . . . consciousness.

No one, of course, really "makes the supernatural super natural." It already is, and it has always been so. All that changes is the filter, the medium, or the prism of the light. All that changes is us.

ENTIRELY NATURAL NOTES

1. These are all allusions to actual cases, including a precognitive dream of Mark Twain's (the future funeral) and a clairvoyant vision of Emmanuel Swedenborg (the distant-neighborhood fire). For fuller discussions of each, see my "Visions of the Impossible: How 'Fantastic' Stories Unlock the Nature of Consciousness," *The Chronicle Review*, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, April 4, 2014.

2. I am indebted to my colleague Ann Taves for this language and basic idea.

3. I am indebted to my colleague Wouter Hanegraaff for this language and basic idea.

4. J. Gordon Melton, *Encyclopedia of Occultism & Parapsychology* (Detroit: Gale Group, 2001), 269. Edgar Cayce had already used the word "channel" in the 1920s and '30s to describe what he was doing (my thanks to Kevin Todeschi via Mitch Horowitz for this historical fact). And, of course, whoever we want to credit with the term's invention, modern channeling possesses countless psychospiritual precedents in the various diviners, bards, shamans, mediums, prophets, revelations, and possessions of human history—the Human as Two.

5. Leslie Kean, *UFOs: Generals, Pilots, and Government Officials Go on the Record* (New York: Harmony Books, 2010). This book begins with a foreword by John Podesta, the fourth chief of staff under President Clinton (1998–2001). For another provocative treatment by a former Green Beret combat veteran, project manager at Los Alamos National Laboratory, and consultant to the National Intelligence Council and the CIA, see John B. Alexander, *UFOs: Myths, Conspiracies, and Realities* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2011). Both authors insist on the base reality of the phenomenon behind and before all the misinformation and hoaxing.

6. I first identified these in *Comparing Religions: Coming to Terms*, with Ata Anzali, Andrea R. Jain, and Erin Prophet (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014). See especially chapter 8.

7. Whitley puzzles over the same "conscious machine" phenomenon in *Transformation: The Breakthrough* (New York: Beech Tree Books, 1988), 37.

8. James Gallant has beautifully made the point with respect to ancient Greek polytheism in "The Humiliating UFOs," *Raritan* Vol. 30, No.4 (2011).

9. I believe I first introduced my own understanding of this notion in the conclusion of *Esalen: America and the Religion of No Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007). For a

similar, and more profound, version, see my friend and colleague Elliot Wolfson's notion of the "time-swerve," in *Language, Eros, Being: Kabbalistic Hermeneutics and the Poetic Imagination* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004).

10. For more on this, see chapter 3 of *Authors of the Impossible: The Paranormal and the Sacred* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), "The Future Technology of Folklore: Jacques Vallee and the UFO Phenomenon."

11. Whitley Strieber, *The Secret School: Preparation for Contact* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997), 227.

12. The comparative practice we are honing and developing here is not entirely new. Early and important strains of it can be found in the British psychical research tradition of the late nineteenth century, where this attempt to unite and yet move beyond mechanistic science and dogmatic religion was called the *tertium quid*, that is, the Third Thing.

13. See, for example, my, "Visions of the Impossible."

14. Although the point is debatable, some have argued that Husserl can be seen as a "transcendental idealist" in the tradition of Immanuel Kant. On this reading, Husserl held that objects are in fact partially constituted by subjectivity: by our awareness and perception of them. This is an especially trippy idea that we do not need to fully understand in order to see how it might relate to Whitley's visionary experiences, which he has routinely described as both a "thing" and a "thought," that is, as a set of real objects that somehow also participated in the nature of mind. Whitley's constant invocation of quantum physics to illustrate how the act of observation somehow calls forth a particular physical reality makes a great deal of sense within the transcendental idealist tradition. If I may be so bold, Whitley's experiences look *a lot* like a visionary demonstration of transcendental idealism, were Kant and Husserl American sci-fi writers and visionaries instead of German philosophers! I am indebted to my colleague Glenn Magee for this philosophical material.

15. Maurice O'C. Walshe, trans. and ed., *The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2009), 145.

16. Ibid., Sermon 24.

17. The fullest treatments of these empirical rogue phenomena toward a revisioning of the mind-brain relationship are the two volumes that came out of the Esalen "Sursem" symposia series over the last decade and a half: Edward F. Kelly and Emily Williams Kelly, eds., *Irreducible Mind: Toward a Psychology for the 21st Century* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2007); and Edward F. Kelly, Adam Crabtree, and Paul Marshall, eds., *Beyond Physicalism: Toward Reconciliation of Science and Spirituality* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2015).

18. Sir William Barrett, *Deathbed Visions: How the Dead Talk to the Dying*, reprinted with a new Introduction by Michael Tymn (Guildford, UK: White Crow Books, 2011). For a more recent discussion, this time by psychiatrist Bruce Greyson of the University of Virginia, see "Seeing

Dead People Not Known to Have Died: 'Peak in Darien' Experiences," *Anthropology and Humanism*, Vol. 35, Issue 2 (2010): 159–171.

19. Not at least one that I can remember. Apparently my family encountered an immense rectangular UFO in the night sky of northern Nebraska on our way to Yankton, South Dakota, to see some relatives in the late 1960s. But I have no memory of this.

20. For much more on this, see *Comparing Religions* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), Kripal, with Anzali, Jain, and Prophet, where I trace this metaphor of the toolbox in the history of the study of religion and develop it more fully.

21. Much of what follows is a rewriting of my "Better Horrors: From Terror to Communion in Whitley Strieber's *Communion* (1987)," for a special issue on "Horrors" in the journal *Social Research* 81/4 (winter 2015): 897–921.

22. Personal communication, 11 August 2014.

23. Linda Zimmerman, *Hudson Valley UFOs: Startling Eyewitness Accounts from 1909 to the Present* (New York: Eagle Press, 2014), 1, 4, 7, 2.

24. Zimmerman, *Hudson Valley UFOs*, 39 (the "hit with a rock" story); 69–71 (the early abductions); 42–43, 74 (psychical capacities); 112–115 (the "wheels"); 83 (the green humanoid); 154–159 (the circular landing marks); 31, 35, 44 (helicopters); 53, 59, 76, 87, 92–93, 128, 155 (spooked animals).

25. Zimmerman, *Hudson Valley UFOs*, 165–166. I don't know where to begin with this one, so I won't.

26. For one of many, see Whitley Strieber, *Transformation: The Breakthrough* (New York: Beech Tree Books, 1988), 128–129.

27. J. Allen Hynek, Philip J. Imbrogno, and Bob Pratt, *Night Siege: The Hudson Valley UFO Sightings* (St. Paul, MN: Llewellyn Publications, 1998), 33, 34, 49, 13.

28. Hynek, Imbrogno, and Pratt, *Night Siege*, 81, 39, 56–57.

29. Jim Steinmeyer, *Charles Fort: The Man Who Invented the Supernatural* (New York: Tarcher/Penguin, 2008).

30. See my "Scattering the Seeds of a Super Story: Charles Fort and the Fantastic Narrative of Western Occulture," in *Authors of the Impossible* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

31. Charles Fort, *The Book of the Damned: The Collected Works of Charles Fort*, Introduction by Jim Steinmeyer (New York: Penguin /Tarcher, 2008), 459.

32. Ibid., 216.

33. Ibid., 264.

34. Ibid., 163.

35. Ibid., 217.

36. William James, *A Pluralistic Universe* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), 309.

37. Whitley Strieber, *Communion: A True Story* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008), 90.

38. Ibid., xv–xvi.

39. Ibid., 300.

40. Ibid., 301.

41. My thanks to my colleague Diana Walsh Pasulka for pointing this passage out to me, and at exactly the right moment.

42. Hermeneutics as a discipline is usually traced back to German romanticism and figures like Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834) and Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911). Its basic methods, though, can easily be found in the history of Jewish and Christian biblical interpretation, particularly within the mystical traditions that moved far beyond the surface historical or literal meanings to the deeper, secret, or "mystical" messages of the texts.

43. Whitley Strieber, *Breakthrough: The Next Step* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), 20.

44. Foreword by Whitley Strieber, in Jacques Vallee, *Dimensions: A Casebook of Alien Contact* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1988), vii. Whitley describes this as probably his "most accurate speculation" in *Breakthrough*, 5; and again in *Confirmation*, 93–94, where he links it explicitly to the phenomenological cut we introduced in ch. 2: "I would suggest that this is probably the best of my many notions about the visitors, especially because it refers only to their effect in our world, a question we can usefully address no matter whether 'they' are aliens or not."

45. There *have* been some very sophisticated discussions of the imaginal component of the UFO phenomenon, but these, as far as I can tell, have taken place in technical or professional contexts (often of a Jungian nature) and have been mostly ignored by the broader public. Consider, for a start, Dennis Stillings, ed., *Cyberbiological Studies of the Imaginal Component in the UFO Contact Experience* (Archaeus Project, 1989).

46. I am indebted here to Jess Byron Hollenback's notion of the "empowered religious imagination" in his marvelous *Mysticism: Experience, Response, and Empowerment* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996).

47. For more on these figures and this history, see my *Mutants and Mystics: Science Fiction, Superhero Comics, and the Paranormal* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), chapter 1.

48. Frederic W. H. Myers, *Human Personality and Its Survival of Bodily Death* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1920), vol. 1, xviii. The first edition appeared in 1903.

49. Myers, *Science and a Future Life with Other Essays* (London: Macmillan, 1901), 37-38. This was originally published in 1893.

50. Charles Fort, *The Book of the Damned*, 1049.

51. G. N. M. Tyrrell, *Apparitions* (London: Gerald Duckworth, 1953), 30.

52. There are numerous references to this line in the UFO folklore. I have not been able to locate an original source. In any case, my use of it here does not rely on its textual history. Whatever its source, the one-liner's message is, as Goldilocks had it, "just right."

53. For examples, see Strieber, *Breakthrough*, 48, 64, 70, and 284–285, where he links this evolutionary spirituality to the "secret Tantric traditions" of India and the American human potential movement.

54. Pierre Lory, "Sexual Intercourse Between Humans and Demons in the Islamic Tradition," and Cathy Gutierrez, "Deadly Dates: Bodies and Sex in Spiritualist Heavens," in Wouter J. Hanegraaff and Jeffrey J. Kripal, eds., *Hidden Intercourse: Eros and Sexuality in the History of Western Esotericism* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011); and Colin Waters, *The Pregnant Ghost and Other Sexual Hauntings* (London: Robert Hale, 1993).

55. April D. DeConick, *Holy Misogyny: Why the Sex and Gender Conflicts in the Early Church Still Matter* (New York: Continuum, 2011).

56. I am well aware that there is no good historical evidence that Mary Magdalene was a prostitute. I am describing the tradition here, not the textual and historical evidence. There is no good historical evidence that Mary was a lifelong virgin either, of course. But that is another story.

57. Wilhelm Fränger, *The Millennium of Hieronymus Bosch* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 104.

58. This is a difficult idea that I do not want to avoid but which I also do not want to pursue here, as it would take us far afield. My fullest statement remains *Roads of Excess, Palaces of Wisdom: Eroticism and Reflexivity in the Study of Mysticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

59. John A. Keel, *The Mothman Prophecies* (New York: Tor, 1991), 82.

60. Whitley Strieber, *Transformation: The Breakthrough* (New York: Beech Tree Books, 1988), 191–200.

61. A cardiologist once heard me describe this experience in a classroom and noted that it sounded like a "complex partial seizure." Maybe it was. I would not deny that. This would explain why it felt like an electrocution and why the energies, in at least some of my memories, focused on the heart as they imploded "in," perhaps into the neurological node in the heart that creates the heartbeat. Who is to say? What I would deny is that the cardiologist's reading and my own reading here need to be mutually exclusive, as if such a neurological event cannot become the very "opening" to something more, that is, to an inrush of Spirit or Self projected as an imaginal out-of-body experience. Within various esoteric anatomies, the bodily locus of the Spirit or Self, after all, is often located precisely "in" the physiological heart. In my own mind, this is simply another illustration of the super natural. It is also an illustration of what I call "the traumatic secret" below, that is, the way that trauma can "crack us open" for an experience of transcendence.

62. And, yes, it *does* matter whether a thinker has been in such a state or not. Major scientists and intellectuals who have known such encounters have insisted on the reality of these phenomena against their nay-saying colleagues. Consider geneticist and Nobel laureate Kary Mullis's account of what looks exactly like an alien abduction (which he positively compares to Whitley's *Communion*) in *Dancing Naked in the Mind Field* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998); or cell biologist and feminist social critic Barbara Ehrenreich's epiphany of what she suggests is an invisible species living in the environment, akin to the gods and extraterrestrials of folklore, in *Living with a Wild God: A Nonbeliever's Search for the Truth about Everything* (New York: Twelve, 2014). Ehrenreich uses her own experience to openly challenge, and reject, the materialist interpretations of science.

63. See David Gordon White, *Kiss of the Yogini: "Tantric Sex" in its South Asian Contexts* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003). This is the second volume in a trilogy that constitutes the most creative and learned interpretive vision we have of medieval Indian Tantra. I cannot recommend them highly enough. The other two are *The Alchemical Body: Siddha Traditions in Medieval India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996) and *Sinister Yogis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

64. White, *Kiss of the Yogini*, 206.

65. Another author who has intuited, if not quite developed, a similar comparison is Kenneth Ring, in his *The Omega Project: Near-Death Experiences, UFO Encounters, and Mind at Large* (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1992). See his brief discussion of "The Kundalini Syndrome," 164–166. Ring's bold book illustrates a number of my own convictions expressed here.

66. Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964), 45–46, 49.

67. Eliade, *Shamanism*, 50, n45. For other references to rock crystals, see Eliade's rich index.

68. Whitley Strieber, *Communion: A True Story* (New York: HarperCollins,1998), 83–84.

69. See David Halperin, “Saint Paul: UFO Abductee?” (Part 2) at http://www.davidhalperin.net/saint-paul-ufo-abductee-part-2/

70. I am hardly the first to suggest this. The world’s trickster myths work in very similar ways, as numerous folklorists and anthropologists have noted. In a similar vein, C. G. Jung read the flying saucer phenomenon in the late 1950s as the collective mind’s symbolic attempt to rebalance itself after a long night of rationalism and mechanism. Finally, George Hansen has argued much the same in his *The Trickster and the Paranormal* (Xlibris, 2001)—required reading, in my opinion, for anyone truly serious about the topic.

71. Maurice O’C. Walshe, trans. and ed., *The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart* (New York: Crossroads Publishing, 2010), 296.

72. I am deeply indebted for this line of thinking to my colleague Harald Atmanspacher. Harald is a Swiss quantum theorist and an expert on the quarter-century friendship between the quantum physicist Wolfgang Pauli and the depth psychologist C. G. Jung. For Harald’s latest work on the same, see Harald Atmanspacher and Christopher A. Fuchs, eds., *The Pauli-Jung Conjecture: And Its Impact Today* (Exeter, UK: Imprint Academic, 2014). Jung sometimes described this “one world” below what we know as the mental and the material as “psychoid.”

73. I am indebted to my colleague Sarah Johnston for this insight.

74. For an eloquent and deeply personal explanation of trance as a technique for accessing human potential, see Adam Crabtree, *Memoir of a Trance Therapist: Hypnosis and the Evocation of Human Potentials* (Victoria, BC: FriesenPress, 2014).

75. Lee Siegel, *Trance-Migrations: Stories of India, Tales of Hypnosis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 2. I am indebted to Lee for my language of “trance-formations” and many of the insights of this particular section.

76. Jeffrey J. Kripal, “The Traumatic Secret: Bataille and the Comparative Erotics of Mystical Literature,” in Jeremy Biles and Kent Brintnall, eds., *Negative Ecstasies: Georges Bataille and the Study of Religion* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015).

77. I cannot pursue the possibility here, but I also want to leave open the possibility that there may be real “demons,” that is, negative spirits or aggressive, invisible species in the environment. There certainly are in people’s experiences throughout human history, and the phenomenological cut demands that we take those experiences seriously and sympathetically. Sometimes the most adequate response to an experience of evil is not a professor’s theory but an exorcism. Having said that, there are moral and intellectual complexities galore here, from the possible presence of mental illness to the historical demonization of other people’s religious experiences.

78. I am indebted for this idea to Jess Hollenback, who articulated it at a symposium on the imaginal that I hosted for the Center for Theory and Research, Esalen Institute, October 19–24, 2014.

79. See especially Matthew T. Kapstein, ed., *The Presence of Light: Divine Radiance and Religious Experience* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004). I cannot pursue this idea here, but the history of light in the religions is connected to the mystical experience of human sexuality. See Mircea Eliade, "Spirit, Light and Seed," in *Occultism, Witchcraft and Cultural Fashions: Essays in Comparative Religions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).

80. See M. David Litwa, *Becoming Divine: An Introduction to Deification in Western Culture* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2013), ch. 4.

81. http://secretsun.blogspot.com/2009/11/astrognostic-trapped-here-on-this-alien.html.

82. April D. DeConick, *The Ancient New Age: How Gnostic Spirituality Revolutionized Religion* (New York: Columbia University Press, forthcoming).

83. The gnostics generally distinguished this immortal spirit (*pneuma*) from the soul (*psyche*), which they believed survives bodily death and can be reincarnated but that is not truly immortal or eternal. Since we live in a flatland culture that denies both aspects of the Human as Two, I often use "soul" and "spirit" interchangeably, not because I think they are the same (I do not), but because they are interchangeable in contemporary American English.

84. The finest application of entanglement to various forms of anomalous experience is Dean Radin's *Entangled Minds: Extrasensory Experiences in a Quantum World* (New York: Paraview, 2006). Radin's book is a wonderful example of employing the philosophical implications of quantum physics to "make the impossible possible."

85. David Kaiser, *How the Hippies Saved Physics: Science, Counterculture, and the Quantum Revival* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2011). I am indebted to my colleagues Nick Herbert and Jane English for reading over this section and providing me expert feedback.

86. I discuss the history of this "physics of consciousness" movement, including and especially the elegant comparisons of Fritjof Capra, in *Esalen*, ch. 13. Capra's book was based partly on a mystical experience he had of the subatomic world, not unlike that of Jane English described immediately below.

87. Jane English, *Fingers Pointing to the Moon: Words and Images of Paradox-Common Sense-Whimsey-Transcendence* (Mount Shasta: Earth Heart, 1999), 101-102.

88. Ibid., 104.

89. See Litwa, *Becoming Divine*, 157.

90. I borrowed the title "Big Sur Real" from one of my work-scholar students at Esalen, in the summer of 2012. I deeply regret that I cannot remember his name. If you read this, please let me know who you are.

91. No, he was not stoned. All Stuart had on that midnight was a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, which he had just put together from the all-night bread bar in the Lodge.

92. One of the easiest places to find glowing orbs in Big Sur is in a book about the place, Henry Miller's lovely memoir, *Big Sur and the Oranges of Hieronymus Bosch* (New York: New Directions, 1957), 75–76.

93. I am indebted for this line of thought to Erik Davis, who has written eloquently about this distinction between "reason" and "resonance" in his dissertation on Philip K. Dick, Terence and Dennis McKenna, and Robert Anton Wilson, "High Weirdness: Visionary Experience in the Seventies Counterculture," PhD diss., Rice University, 2015." Erik is drawing on a number of thinkers here, especially Veit Erlmann, *Reason and Resonance: A History of Modern Aurality* (New York: Zone Books, 2010).

94. Mark Fox, *Spiritual Encounters with Unusual Light Phenomena: Lightforms* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2008), 59–60, 158. Another book, based on the same archives, is Annekatrin Puhle, *Light Changes: Experiences in the Presence of Transforming Light* (Guilford, UK: White Crow Books, 2014).

95. Paul Marshall, *The Shape of the Soul* (unpublished manuscript), chapter 5, "Soul Spheres."

96. Diego Escolar, "Boundaries of Anthropology: Empirics and Ontological Relativism in a Field Experience with Anomalous Luminous Entities in Argentina," *Anthropology and Humanism* 37/1 (2012): 27–44. The Marton case is also discussed in this essay.

97. For an eloquent study of the elaborate historical processes through which such encounters were "disciplined" by Church authorities and theological writers until they "meant the right things," see Diana Walsh Pasulka, *Heaven Can Wait: Purgatory in Catholic Devotional and Popular Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

98. Brent Landau, *Revelation of the Magi: The Lost Tale of the Wise Men's Journey to Bethlehem* (New York: HarperCollins, 2010), 90–91. My thanks to Brent for help here with some of the weird comparative details.

99. E-mail communication of February 2, 2014, 10:21 a.m.

100. A few very brave intellectuals have struggled with this. I am thinking in particular of the writers Aimé Michel, Jacques Vallee, and Bertrand Méheust. For a discussion of these three men, all of whom know or knew one another, see my *Authors of the Impossible*, chapters 3 and 4.

101. For his ranking, see the epilogue to John Fairley and Simon Welfare, *Arthur C. Clarke's World of Strange Powers* (New York: HarperCollins, 1984), 243. This was the second volume of three such volumes.

102. The best source of the three laws is probably Arthur C. Clarke, "Hazards of Prophecy: The Failure of Imagination," chapter 2 of the 1973 edition of *Profiles of the Future: An Enquiry Into the Limits of the Possible*. The idea expressed in the famous third law is hardly original with Clarke, however. As others have noted, very similar lines can be found in Charles Fort's *Wild Talents* (1932) and Rider Haggard's occult novel *She* (1886), among other texts. See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Clarke%27s_three_laws. I would only add that much of nineteenth-century psychical research (which employed techno-etymologies to describe psychical phenomena), many other works of occult fiction—Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *The Coming Race* (1871) comes to mind—and the enigmatic Nikola Tesla, who entertained both extraterrestrial and mystical notions, all can be placed here as well. This entire techno-magical or electro-mystical complex has been studied by Erik Davis in his marvelous *TechGnosis: Myth, Magic, and Mysticism in the Age of Information* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2015).

103. Arthur C. Clarke, epilogue to Fairley and Welfare, *Arthur C. Clarke's World of Strange Powers*, 240.

104. Although I came up with this idea "on my own," it turns out that it is not entirely original. Hence this line from the Girl Genius: "Any sufficiently analyzed magic is indistinguishable from technology" at http://www.girlgeniusonline.com/comic.php?date=20081205#.VLZwnEvfw0s. As is so often the case, it is popular culture, in this case a fictional female superhero in a comic book, that gets it right. Go Girl Genius!

105. Gregory L. Little, introduction to Andrew Collins, *Lightquest: Your Guide to Seeing and Interacting with UFOs, Mystery Lights and Plasma Intelligences* (Memphis: Eagle Wing Books, 2012), 15.

106. See the Kim Arnold interview in Paola Leopizzi Harris, *UFOs: How Does One Speak to a Ball of Light?* (San Antonio: Anomalist Books, 2011), 1–32.

107. For much more on this and the full argument, see my *Mutants and Mystics*, chapter 6, "Mutation: X-Men Before Their Time."

108. Whitley Strieber and Anne Strieber, *The Communion Letters* (New York: Harper Prism, 1997), 287.

109. Mark Pilkington, *Mirage Men: An Adventure into Paranoia, Espionage, Psychological Warfare, and UFOs* (New York: Skyhorse, 2010); Robbie Graham, *Silver Screen Saucers: Sorting Fact from Fantasy in Hollywood's UFO Movies* (forthcoming); Diana Walsh Pasulka, private communications.

110. I am thinking in particular of Bruce Lincoln, Hugh Urban, and Diana Walsh Pasulka.

111. Anyone serious about the subject must read Michael Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).

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